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DISRAELI AND THE DEFENCE OF INDIA

A study of the motives underlying Benjamin Disraeli's Eastern policy, 1874-1880.

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PREFACE:

This thesis is a survey of the foreign policy of Benjamin Disraeli during his ministry 1874-1880, with special emphasis placed upon events in the East. The main intention has been to discover whether or not the policies pursued by Disraeli in the Near Eastern crisis of 1876-1878 and the crisis in Afghanistan during 1878-1880, were part of one consistent policy and, if so, what the basis of that policy was. Emphasis has been placed on Disraeli's own actions and opinions, rather than upon a factual account of the two crises and the complicated international diplomacy involved in them.

The great six volume biography of Disraeli, begun by W.F.Monypenny and completed by G.E.Buckle, proved to be the most useful and comprehensive source of primary material available. Extensive use was also made of the Hansard records of Disraeli's speeches in Parliament, T.E.Kebbel's two volumes of selected speeches by Disraeli, and the Marquis of Zetland's collection of Disraeli's letters to Lady's Bradford and Chesterfield, also in two volumes. Numerous secondary works were consulted and of these the very detailed works of Professor R.W.Seton-Watson and B.H.Sumner on the Eastern Question were especially valuable.

Acknowledgement and thanks are due to Professor W.D.

McIntyre of Canterbury University for his patient supervision and helpful advice. I would also like to thank my typist, Miss Valerie F. Harris.

CHAPTER I: DISRAELI'S FOREIGN POLICY BEFORE 1874.

On 27 July 1837, Benjamin Disraeli was elected as a Conservative Member of Parliament for the constituency of Maidstone. This was Disraeli's fifth attempt to secure election to the House of Commons in five years. His long struggle for political recognition and power had finally begun. He remained a member of the House of Commons until 1876 when he was elevated to the House of Lords as the Earl of Beaconsfield. During the thirty-five years preceding the election of 1874 the Conservative party held office only on three brief occasions: 1852, 1859 and 1867-8. In all three cases the government was a minority government dependent for its existence on the continuance of divisions within the opposition rather than on its own strength. Moreover, except for the few months between Derby's retirement at the end of February 1868 and the general election of the same year, the government was led by the Earl of Derby with Disraeli leading in the Lower House as Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Obviously Disraeli's political activities prior to 1874 had been almost wholly confined to the opposition benches and Disraeli was the first English politician of real political stature to propound and implement the view that the

duty of the opposition was to oppose and criticise the government in office. The singlemindedness of Disraeli's opposition often alarmed his more moderate colleagues and annoyed the government politicians who felt that such unwavering resistance smacked of faction. Clearly the historian is faced with a task of some difficulty in deciding how much of what Disraeli said when out of office is an expression of his true political feeling and how much of it was directed purely at weakening the government and correspondingly strengthening the opposition. There is no doubt that Disraeli's prime ambition when out of office was to get back into office as quickly as possible. Even before he had achieved any position of power at all, Disraeli freely admitted that he felt a politician to be largely "a child of circumstance" who should not be bound in office to the opinions he had expressed prior to gaining it.[1] Disraeli's rebellion against Sir Robert Peel on the free trade issue and then his abandonment of the policy of protection shortly after, demonstrated that he certainly did not hesitate to shift his ground when he felt it would be advantageous to do so. Justifiable though this attitude may be in terms of realism, and of political commonsense, it provided his critics, both contemporary and historical, with a basis for the claim that

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1. Speech to electors, 16 Dec 1835, T.E.Kebbel, Life of Lord Beaconsfield, p.12.

there is really no consistent policy or political principle to be found in Disraeli's policies when in opposition.

Despite this, it would be idle to suggest that a politician of Disraeli's mental calibre and experience had not, by 1874, given serious thought to the problems of Britain's external relations and arrived at some basic conclusions. Disraeli spoke quite often in the House on the various issues relating to the foreign policy of the government and a consideration of his speeches and letters does reveal certain basic preoccupations. Admittedly, the consistency of Disraeli's thinking is not immediately obvious and it often appears that he was attacking the government with any weapon he found at his disposal. He attacked Palmerston for his jingoistic meddling in the affairs of other countries but condemned Gladstone for his spineless foreign policy. He blamed the Crimean War upon the excessive caution of the diplomacy of the Aberdeen coalition yet after the advent of Palmerston he staunchly advocated peace. Some of his speeches criticising the policy of Palmerston in Afghanistan were almost exact replicas of speeches to be made by Disraeli's critics in the latter years of the 1874-1880 ministry.

Yet, underlying all this there was a certain continuity to his outlook. Clearly Disraeli was always preoccupied

with the belief that some sort of rudimentary balance of power must be maintained in Europe if European peace and the security of British interests were to be assured. Secondly, the greatest threat to this balance of power would come from Russian expansion southwards into the near and middle East. Finally, Disraeli believed that Russian domination of the East would not only threaten British interests in Europe but also would endanger her Indian Empire and by 1874 Disraeli was convinced that it was Britain's overseas empire which provided the basis for her power, both real and apparent.

British diplomacy in Europe in the thirty years preceding 1874 appeared to Disraeli to have fluctuated from one extreme to the other. On the one hand, there was the policy of Palmerston. Palmerston's point of view was that Britain was fitted by her traditions and institutions to be a natural guardian of liberty. But this liberty was not an affair only of Britain's domestic politics and she must see to it that British influence and strength were used to support her ideas abroad. This had led, in Disraeli's opinion, to a foreign policy which was at once both meddlesome and unsuccessful involving as it did on a number of occasions British intervention in the domestic politics of another country. Speaking at the time of the Don Pacifico

debate which involved the question of the maintenance of the rights and liberties of a British subject overseas, Disraeli claimed that Palmerston had lost sight of the real interests of Britain. Alone amongst the speakers in this debate, Disraeli questioned the policy of the government on the grounds of utility. British interests were always, to Disraeli, material interests and were, as he remarked in 1878, "of that character which are the sources of the wealth or the securities of the strength of the country."[1] This kind of interest had not been secured by Palmerston involving Britain in the sentimental cause of nationalism. The real interest of Britain in Europe was to maintain a balance of power. It was, therefore, to the English advantage that the north of Italy should belong to Austria so as to curb French Italian ambitions. Better by far that Sicily should belong to Naples than to a stronger power. So too should Schleswig and Holstein belong to Denmark rather than to Russia. Yet Palmerston had given all these up in the cause of nationalism. Nationalism was a force in which Disraeli neither believed nor understood. The futility of Palmerston's approach had been clearly revealed in 1849 when Russia had crushed the Hungarian nationalist forces. Palmerston had

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1. Speech in the House, 17 Jun 1878, Hansard, Third Series, 237, Col.3415.

refused to come to their aid on the grounds that it was not in British interests to risk a war with Russia. Palmerston did not even appear to be applying his principles of national liberty consistently.

In Disraeli's eyes, politics and especially international politics, should be judged upon standards of utility not sentimentality. This did not prevent him from believing some intangible factors, prestige in particular, to be a crucial part of a nation's power. However, it was not the role of Britain to interfere in the domestic politics of other nations. It was misguided to try and set up liberal constitutions on the British model in countries where historical traditions made such a government unsuitable. International politics, he perceived, were power politics, and power was the thing that mattered. A nation must possess the power to implement its policy and preserve its own material interests, and Britain should formulate her foreign policy with this in mind.[1]

But this was not a policy of withdrawal from active involvement in foreign affairs and the attempt of the Liberals under Gladstone to avoid as far as possible any international committments was as misguided as Palmerston's policy.

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1. A.P.Thornton, The Imperial Idea And Its Enemies, p.5.

> I can never believe that the peace of Europe is to be maintained by hiding our heads in the sand, and comforting ourselves with the conviction that nobody will find us out

said Disraeli, speaking in 1848 against allowing Prussia to gain Schleswig and Holstein.[1] Rather, "in the settlement of the great affairs of Europe, the presence of England[2] is the best guarantee of peace."[3] Britain must adopt the role of arbiter in international disputes to ensure that the internal balance of Europe, which was the best security for British interests, should be maintained. A position of isolation was quite obviously not a position of strength. In this she should act with France as an ally. Except for a very brief period following the revolution in France in 1848, this alliance with France was a touchstone of Disraeli's foreign policy right through until the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 eclipsed France for a while as an international force. The Crimean War, the seizure of Schleswig and Holstein, and the repudiation of the Black Sea Clauses of the Treaty of Paris by Russia in 1871, need not have occurred if Britain had made it clear that she would intervene and that she had the power to intervene

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1. Speech in the House, 19 Apr 1848, W.F.Monypenny and G.E. Buckle, The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, iii, p.185-6, (hereinafter, M & B).
2. Disraeli usually talked in terms of 'England' in his speeches and writings but, of course, was really referring to Great Britain.
3. Speech in the House, Feb 1849, M & B, p.187.

successfully. Britain's position should be one of neutrality but an armed and watchful neutrality backed by an understanding with France. "A mediation of phrases" would not suffice.[1]

Disraeli never seems to have doubted the direction from which the threat to European security would come. In the House of Commons in August 1843, he made a speech which is almost uncanny in its resemblance to the speeches he was to make in office between 1875 and 1878. In it he stressed the threat to the integrity of the Ottoman Empire posed by the Russians who were expanding southward. If you looked at a map, he claimed, it was clear that the two strongest positions in the world were the Sound[2] and the Dardanelles. As long as these were secure from the Russians the balance of power was safe. But if the present advance of Russia continued and she gained control of one of these positions, the balance would be shaken. Should she ever gain both, "universal Empire" would threaten. Therefore, Britain must realise that her true policy was by diplomatic action to maintain Turkey in a state to hold the Dardanelles. Turkey was still a nation of "unequalled" resources and with the support of European diplomacy she would be more than equal

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1. Disraeli to Lord Derby, 17 Aug 1870, M & B, v, p.128.
2. This probably refers to the outlet of the Baltic into the North Sea.

to this task.[1] These are very obviously the same policies Disraeli was to seek to follow when finally in a position to do so. Obviously this conception of the Eastern Question owed a good deal to the influence of Palmerston and this particular speech was made in support of him. At the time, the speech was considered remarkable only in that Disraeli had had the temerity to criticise his leader Peel.

Disraeli's alarm at the consequences of Russian expansion was not then something that developed with the Russophobia that gripped public opinion immediately preceding the Crimean War. Neither can his insistence on the threat which Russia posed to the balance of power within Europe be dismissed as an appeal to public sentiment since his first appeal was made before Britain became especially anti-Russian. Actually, Disraeli never exhibited the violent antipathy for everything Russian that characterised British opinion at the time of Crimea and again in the 1870's. Again we see Disraeli's enlightened conception of the role of power in international politics. He felt that Russia was acting perfectly legitimately in pursuing her policy of expansion and Disraeli made no bones about the fact that he respected her power and intelligence in so doing.[2] Russia was playing the game of power politics and Britain must play the same

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1. Speech in the House, 15 Aug 1843, M & B, ii,pp.179-80.
2. Ibid, p.180.

game to ensure that Russian ambitions never threatened the security of Europe and thus, ultimately, the interests of Britain.

As the 1840's drew to a close, Disraeli was convinced that the threat had grown stronger and that Britain would ultimately have to act. "Russia alone develops herself and will develop herself still more in the great struggle which is perhaps nearer than we imagine", he wrote to Lady Londonderry. He went on to say that, without English opposition, "there will be no repelling force which will prevent the Slavonians conquering the whole of Europe."[1]

Yet Russia did not need to be checked by force. Disraeli was convinced that a forceful and sensible diplomacy by the Aberdeen Coalition which made it clear that Britain would not tolerate the partition of Turkey and would act in concert with France to prevent it, would have curbed Tsar Nicholas' aggressive policies. Thus, for Disraeli, the Crimean War was "just but unnecessary". Nonetheless, the Conservative party was strongly opposed to Russian designs on Turkey

> because if she succeeds in getting possession of Constantinople, we believe she will exercise such a preponderating influence in European politics as would be fatal to the civilization of Europe and injurious to the best interests of England.[2]

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1. Disraeli to Lady Londonderry, 30 Dec 1849, M & B, iii, p.195.
2. Speech in the House, 31 Mar 1854, ibid, p.539.

With the fall of the Aberdeen Coalition, Disraeli could see no reason why the Conservative party should not prosecute the war and was bitterly disappointed when Derby refused to form a government. But the Russians needed only to be checked, not completely defeated, and following the fall of Sebastapol, Disraeli was adamant that the Allied powers should agree to the Russian proposals of peace. He feared that Palmerston would commit Britain to a new and even more costly campaign endeavouring to conquer the Crimea and drive Russia from the shores of the Black Sea. The vital objects of the war seemed to Disraeli to have been achieved with Alexander's acceptance of a modified version of the Four Points drawn up by the Allies and Austria at the end of 1854.[1] These involved the cessation of the Russian Protectorate over the Danubian Principalities and over Serbia, the free navigation of the Danube, and the abandonment of the Russian claim to any rights over the Christian subjects of the Porte. Russia also agreed to the neutralization of the Black Sea. So long as the clauses of the Treaty of Paris were maintained, the threat of Russian expansion into Turkey and through the Dardanelles could not materialize. Disraeli, for the time being, was satisfied.

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1. Disraeli to Greville, 12 Nov 1856, M & B, iv, p.18.

Following the Crimean settlement, Russia turned to Central Asia to realize her dreams of imperial expansion and during the next twenty years swallowed the greater part of it. As a result, by the 1870's, the British were beginning to fear for their ascendency in Southern Asia. Friction between the two in this particular theatre was to culminate in the Second Afghan War. However, for fifteen years following Crimea, Russia did not appear to pose a serious threat to European peace.

In 1870 the Russian bear smashed his way back into the European arena as a result of the Franco-German War in that year. Disraeli, like many others, does not appear to have realized the significance of the meteoric rise of the German state under Bismarck. On the eve of the Franco-German War, he still seems to have viewed German power as something of an illusion.[1] Consequently, the French defeat came as a shock and a setback to him as it meant that France would not be a very powerful ally for years to come. The Russians were not slow to seize the opportunity provided by the temporary crippling of one of the signatories of the Treaty of Paris and repudiated the Black Sea Clauses included in it. The balance was once again in danger from the East. Russia was persuaded to submit her claim to a conference of the

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1. For example, Disraeli to Stanley, 21 Apr 1868, M & B, v, p.85.

powers in London, but it was understood by all parties that the modification would be agreed to.

Disraeli never seems to have possessed the slightest doubt as to the ultimate goal the Russians had in view. On 25 January 1871, he wrote to Lord Derby that the London Conference was bound to be unsatisfactory as "I understand we are to relinquish all we fought for, and because I am persuaded that Russia will make another move on the board within about six months."[1] Speaking in the House a few days later, he claimed that the German victory had completely destroyed the balance of power. "Not a single principle in the management of our foreign affairs accepted by all statesmen for guidance up to six months ago any longer exists." The first result of this new imbalance had been the repudiation of the Black Sea Clauses but Disraeli made it clear that, in his opinion, it was not Russian control of the Black Sea that was at stake, but the city of Constantinople. Russia's policy in endeavouring to gain access to the sea was legitimate if disturbing, but her further policy was to gain the city of Constantinople and this was illegitimate. All that had been fought for in the Crimean War was at stake once more.[2] That Russia was bent on the seizure of the Dardanelles and the

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1. Disraeli to Derby, 25 Jan 1871, M & B, v, p.132.
2. Speech in the House, Jan 1871, ibid, pp.133-4.

partition of Turkey as part of a policy of imperialistic expansion deliberately designed to give her dominance in both Europe and Asia was to remain Disraeli's belief until the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. It was, moreover, a policy which posed a direct and very serious threat to the interests of Britain and her Empire. Not only would British interests in Europe be threatened by Russian hegemony in the Near East, but the security of Britain's Indian Empire would be at stake and, by 1874, Disraeli was convinced that India was the cornerstone of an Empire upon which Britain's power and prosperity depended.

As one of the more extravagant orators of British parliamentary history, Disraeli always found the words "empire" and later "imperial" rolled easily off the tongue, but his conception of just what the value of Britain's overseas empire was to Britain changed very significantly during the thirty-seven years preceding 1874. Disraeli in the 1830's was a colourful, flamboyant young man whose mind reflected his external appearance. It abounded with colourful and romantic ideas but lacked the disciplined thought and steadiness of purpose which was to come in later years. The overseas empire of Britain seemed to such a man a glorious institution preserving the greatness of British historical traditions. If for no other reasons, the empire should continue to exist as a monument to the past. In 1833, Disraeli

feared the loss of "our great Colonial Empire" and hoped that some "Great Spirit" might arise to lead Britain through the troubled times and maintain "the glory of the Empire."[1] In one of the 'Runnymede' letters, published by Disraeli in The Times in the first half of 1836, Melbourne was assailed with "lounging away the glory of an Empire."[2]

The practical value of the Empire seems to have concerned Disraeli rather less in the 1830's, but in another of the 'Runnymede' letters of 1836 he claimed that "ships, colonies and commerce" were the basis of England's greatness and his 'Old England' letters of 1838 called for "a powerful colonial system, involving the interests of the merchant, the manufacturer and the shipowner."[3] It does not appear that Disraeli had yet got down to grappling with the economic realities of colonisation. It is arguable whether he ever did, but by the later 1840's his ideas upon the possible practical value of the colonial empire had developed into a more concrete form. By this time the Conservative party had disintegrated over the question of free trade and Disraeli now stood at the head of the bulk of the party, as an avowed supporter of protection. Obviously he now sought to link the cause of empire to the banner of protection. Speaking at

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1. B.Disraeli, What is he?, cited in M & B, i, p.225.
2. Ibid, p.321.
3. cited by S.R.Stembridge, "Disraeli and Millstones", Journal of British Studies, November 1956, v, p.122.

Newport Pagnell in mid 1847, he put forward a scheme of moderate but imperial protection between Britain and her overseas possessions.[1] In letters to Stanley at the end of 1848 he contemplated the idea of an Imperial Union between Britain and the colonies.[2] But protection, Disraeli soon discovered, was fast becoming a dead letter and he was far too much a political realist to waste time in the profitless support of a lost cause.

When protection went overboard, Disraeli's plans for the commercial integration of Britain and her Empire went with it. In a booming free trade England, the colonies appeared to contribute little to the prosperity of the country, while Britain's committment to defend the colonies and colonists was a drain upon her finances. In the two minority governments of 1852 and 1859 Disraeli apparently found that the glory of the Empire faded before the immediate necessity of producing a popular budget. On 13 August 1852, faced with the prospect of having to support Canada in a dispute with the United States over the encroachments of American fishermen upon Canadian and Newfoundland fishing grounds, Disraeli viewed the colonial connection with considerable irritation in a letter to Lord Malmesbury, the Foreign Secretary. "These wretched colonies will all be independent too, in a few years,

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1. M & B, iii, p.24.
2. Disraeli to Stanley, 17 and 28 Dec 1849, ibid, pp.233-7.

and are a millstone around our neck."[1] Later in the same month, following the successful conclusion of the Second Burmese War, Disraeli wrote to Lord Derby arguing against any extension of the Indian frontiers because of the cost involved.[2]

In a like manner in 1859, Disraeli proved decidedly hostile to the demands of the Navy for new armaments. This at a time when naval warfare had been revolutionized to such an extent by the introduction of the ironclads that all the navies of the world were faced with the task of rebuilding their strength from scratch, seems lamentably shortsighted. The fact that Britannia continued to rule the waves owed nothing to Benjamin Disraeli.[3] In 1866, again faced with the necessity of producing a good budget, Disraeli wrote to Lord Derby advocating that the Canadians should be given complete self-government and left to fend for themselves and that Britain should give up its colonies in West Africa.[4] The letter was written after an unexpected military drain had been caused by the sudden despatch of troops to Canada to protect the colony against a threatened Fenian raid from the United States. It reflects, more than anything else, Disraeli's irritation at Britain's rather one-sided relation-

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1. Disraeli to Malmesbury, 13 Aug 1852, M & B, iii, p.385.
2. Disraeli to Derby, 31 Aug 1852, ibid, pp.397-8.
3. R.Blake, Disraeli, p.395.
4. Disraeli to Derby, 30 Sep 1866, M & B, iv, p.476.

ship with the colonies at this time whereby the colonies brooked no interference in their local government by Britain yet expected Britain to safeguard them against external threats and internal disorder. There is a striking similarity of tone between this letter and that written in 1852. After long and frustrating years in opposition, Disraeli found himself precariously in office and was desperate to produce a popular budget to consolidate the Conservative position. In 1866 as in 1852 and 1859, he allowed this consideration to blind him to considerations outside his own department.

But in 1866 Disraeli was certainly not opposed to the cause of empire. In fact, at the beginning of the 1860's, Disraeli was developing an altogether different conception of the value of the Empire to Britain. Speaking from the hustings at Aylesbury in April 1859, he stressed the extra-European basis of power which the Empire afforded Britain. The day was soon coming, he said, when the question of the balance of power could not be confined to Europe. The states of the New World and Australasia were already making their influence felt while "old Europe" exhausted herself in wars. Britain alone through her overseas possessions, was assured of continuing power and influence.[1] Now Disraeli is evaluating the Empire

1. M & B, iv, p.231.

not as a commercial proposition but as a source of power, and he was astute enough to realize that these were two quite different things. He elaborated on this theme in 1863 when speaking in the House against the cession of the Ionian Islands to Greece. The "destinies of the Empire" he said, must not be left to "prigs and pedants." This was probably a reference to the historian Goldwin Smith, a staunch advocate of the advantages of free trade. The Empire had been created by men motivated by "the instinct of power" and "the love of country." He went on to claim that

> there can be no question either in or out of this House that the best mode of preserving wealth is power. A country and especially a maritime country, must get possession of the strong places of the world if it wishes to contribute to its power. [1]

On 13 March 1865, Disraeli claimed in the House that if Britain were to quit Canada it would be such a disastrous step as to lead ultimately to "the invasion of our country and the subjugation of our people."[2] Britain was now a world, rather than a European power he claimed in his speeches on re-election in 1867. "She is the Metropolis of a great maritime empire extending to the boundaries of the furtherest ocean" with "a greater sphere of action than any European Power."[3]

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1. M & B, iv, pp.334-5.
2. Ibid, p.407.
3. Ibid, p.467.

This coordination of the interests of Britain and her overseas colonies represented a new conception of the Empire although this was not realized at the time. In effect, Disraeli was saying that while the colonies were dependent upon Britain both for their origin and their protection from external threats, the power that Britain possessed to protect her Empire was based largely upon the possession of that Empire. Without the Empire, British greatness would diminish for two reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, the strategic position of the colonies and their potential material value as a source of wealth and resources, gave a very real assurance of the continuance of British prosperity. But this was not the only value of the Empire and in his famous Crystal Palace Speech on 24 June 1872, Disraeli attacked the government for "viewing everything in a financial aspect and totally passing by those moral and political considerations which make nations great."[1] He perceived that power on the international scene could not be measured purely in terms of tangible assets. The Empire not only made a material contribution to the power of Britain, it also helped create an illusion of power. By the possession of the Empire and by the discharging of her responsibilities towards this Empire, Britain assumed the appearance and prestige of a great power and Disraeli saw that there was in fact little

1. M & B, vi, pp.194-6.

difference between apparent and effective power. Thus, his desire to preserve and increase the prestige and influence of Britain was not a matter of sentiment. In international politics prestige was a matter of very considerable importance. Outside of open warfare, the power and influence of a nation depended upon her prestige and therefore, anything which added prestige to Britain also added power. The essential requirement of a great power was to appear a great power.

The Abyssinian expedition of 1867 illustrates the direction of Disraeli's thought at this stage. It brought Britain no commercial or territorial gains but the expedition's rescue of a British envoy and a British Consul imprisoned in a nearly impregnable fortress in the middle of a half-civilized country, demonstrated "a great nation" acting in a "striking and significant manner."[1] Writing in retrospect in 1875, Disraeli refused to review the expenditure of nine million pounds for the purpose of the expedition with regret because it "was a notable feat at arms and highly raised our prestige in the east."[2]

The two most often quoted statements concerning Disraeli's outlook upon the Empire are the Manchester and Crystal Palace speeches of 1872. These were made at a time when

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1. Speech in the House, 2 Jul 1868, M & B, v, p.45.
2. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 2 Oct 1875, ibid, p.455.

England's free trade boom was beginning to falter, when foreign competition was growing and when there was a steady rise in unemployment. At this time informed opinion was swinging towards favouring the maintenance of the Empire and Disraeli was clearly trying to make political capital out of this. This is particularly evident in the Crystal Palace Speech where the Liberals were attacked for having deliberately endeavoured to bring about "the disintegration of the Empire of England" and the Conservatives were associated with the cause of maintaining the Empire. It is important to remember, however, that when Disraeli confronted his listeners with the alternatives of "a comfortable England modelled and moulded upon Continental principles and meeting in due course an inevitable fate", or "a great country, an Imperial country", a country where their sons might rise to "command the respect of the world" the ideas expressed have been formed during the previous thirteen years.[1]

If Disraeli believed that all of Britain's overseas possessions had a role to play in the balance of power in the world, the Empire was for him always divided into the Indian Empire and the Colonial Empire. The Colonial Empire he valued more for what it represented in prestige and potential resources than because he possessed any real

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1. 24 Jun 1872, M & B, vi, pp.194-6.

affection for the colonies or the colonists themselves. The realities of colonization seem always to have escaped Disraeli and in 1876 he still saw the colonies as places to which Englishmen went to make fortunes before returning to England to set themselves up in politics.[1] The colonies were extensions of England overseas, inhabited by Englishmen who never lost their contact with the home country. The Indian Empire was something else altogether, something romantically Oriental and to Disraeli, something very much more significant than the colonial possessions.

The romance of the East had enchanted the young Jew during his tour of the Mediterranean and the Near East in 1830 and 1831. The glamour of what he saw completely intoxicated Disraeli and he formed then, prejudices and preconceptions which were to remain with him for the rest of his life. Intensely proud of his Jewish ancestry, it was natural that he should find much to like in the Turks who treated the Jewish merchants with tolerance and even generosity. When considering Disraeli's stand for the integrity of the Ottoman Empire in 1876 and 1877, it is as well to remember that in 1830 he planned to volunteer for the Turkish Army to fight against the Albanians.

India was part of this gorgeous East. Like Turkey, India was a land of ancient races and civilizations and to

1. Speech in the House, 20 Mar 1876, 3 Hansard 228 Cols.293-5.

Disraeli she held infinite appeal. The romantic notions Disraeli associated with India appear in his third novel, Tancred, published in 1847. Fakredeen, a fickle Syrian character, advises Tancred, the English Prime Minister, to persuade the Queen to transfer the seat of her Empire to Delhi where she would find "an immense Empire readymade, a first rate army, and a large revenue." He then moves on to talk of a vast empire including the Near and Middle East and India which he feels would be practicable.[1]

The course of his parliamentary career enabled Disraeli to gain a practical knowledge of the Indian situation to ally with his romantic attachment for it. In 1852 he served on a Committee of the House appointed to consider the system of Indian government. As a result of the knowledge he gained from it, Disraeli dissociated himself from the government's policy of leaving affairs in the hands of the East India Company well before the Indian Mutiny of 1857 proved he had judged the situation correctly. Disraeli attacked the government hotly in the House for jeopardizing "that wonderful progress of human events which the foundation of our Indian Empire represents." He decried the spirit of vengeance abroad, insisted upon the just foundation of Indian grievances and advised that the relations between India and the Queen, as the symbolic ruler and sovereign, should be drawn closer.

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1. M & B, iii, p.44.

The obvious beginning of the line of thought that was to lead to the Royal Titles Bill of 1876 also appears with the thought that "you can only act upon the opinion of Eastern nations through their imagination."[1] It was under the guidance of Disraeli that the government of India was finally transferred from the Company to the Crown in 1859.

As Disraeli came to consider more closely the role of the Empire in the balance of power, both present and future, India appeared to him of ever greater importance. In 1867 he went so far as to suggest England was "more an Asiatic power than a European"[2] and there is no doubt Disraeli saw the Indian Empire as the most valuable source of prestige and material resources that Britain possessed. The brightest jewel in the Imperial Crown, India provided a foundation on which Britain's influence in Europe could be based. The one guaranteed the continued existence of the other as a source of power and wealth. In September 1866, Disraeli wrote to Lord Derby:

> Power and influence we should exercise in Asia; consequently in Eastern Europe, consequently in Western Europe, but what is the use of these colonial deadweights which we do not govern. 3

Written at a time when the pressures of the office of

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1. M & B, iv, pp.88-92.
2. Speech on re-election, ibid, p.467.
3. Disraeli to Derby, 30 Sep 1866, ibid, p.476.

Chancellor of the Exchequer led Disraeli in a moment of irritation to express the view that the colonies were not worth the expense of maintaining them. These words provide a clear illustration of his estimate of the importance of India to Britain. At no stage in his whole parliamentary career did Disraeli ever waver in the belief that India was the cornerstone of the Empire and an essential foundation to Britain's greatness.

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While it is impossible to deduce a detailed and consistent foreign policy from Disraeli's occasional speeches and letters before 1874, it is clear that he did come to office with a few fundamental preconceptions and basic intentions. He was, firstly, convinced that to abdicate her imperial responsibilities and withdraw from an active role in European politics would lead ultimately to the extinction of Britain as a great power. Britain must appear and act as a great power if she was to remain one. By her intervention in Europe she could secure some sort of balance of power which would safeguard British interests and maintain the respect of the other European powers. By the possession of

a large overseas empire, including the vast, populous sub-continent of India, she assured herself of the material resources and prestige needed to make her interventions in international politics effective.

Secondly, Disraeli came to office convinced that European peace and security was jeopardized by the imbalance of power in Europe following the Franco-Prussian War. This imbalance not only endangered British interests in Western Europe but posed a direct threat to the maintenance of her Indian Empire. Disraeli did not see this threat stemming from the new German Empire. He had greeted the outcome of the war as heralding a "German revolution, a greater political event than the French Revolution of the last century" which would invalidate the basis of previous foreign policies.[1] But in 1871 Bismarck declared Germany a satiated state and Disraeli always seems to have been sure that the real threat was posed by Russia. He was convinced that if Russian designs on Turkey were not checked, Constantinople would fall, Russia would become a Meditteranean power, and at the same time assure herself of virtual hegemony in the Near East. The domination of the Near East assured by the possession of India and political influence in Turkey, which was a basis of British prestige and influence in Europe, would be lost.

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1. Speech in the House, Feb 1871, M & B, v, p.133.

Britain would be left standing without an ally and isolated from what Disraeli considered to be the basis of her Empire in face of a massive and aggressive Russian Empire. Disraeli, in 1874, was determined that this situation would never occur and that Britain must be prepared to act positively, both in Europe and elsewhere in order to ensure that it did not.

CHAPTER II: THE EARLY MINISTRY: 1874-5.

From the middle of 1876 until the end of his ministry, Disraeli concerned himself primarily with the question of foreign policy. Until the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878, it was the Eastern Question which claimed his attention. Following the Congress of Berlin, Disraeli's diplomacy took on a broader frame of reference, involving the affairs of Afghanistan, South Africa and developments in the Near East and Europe. These were "real politics"[1] worthy of the attention of a true statesman. It would be a mistake, however, to begin a study of Disraeli's policy abroad with the Bulgarian Atrocity agitation of 1876. The first two and a half years of his ministry also provided him with opportunities to demonstrate the new direction and firmness that he was determined to bring to British foreign policy. Moreover, the basic preoccupations which provided the guidelines of his policy in 1874 and 1875 were the same preoccupations which guided his thinking before 1874 and were to determine the direction of his policy during the Eastern crisis.

The international situation in 1874 was full of foreboding. On the European scene, France had sunk into a

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1. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 26 May 1876, Zetland, Marquess of (ed), The Letters of Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield, ii, p.49.

temporary eclipse and Italy, although now accepted as a nation, remained a negligible quantity. Germany had assumed an alarming preponderance in Europe, all the more worrying because she was moving towards a closer alliance with the imperial courts of Austria and Russia. In May 1873, a military convention had been signed between Russia and Germany. It was followed in June of the same year by a written compact between Austria and Russia. The contents of the latter agreement were somewhat vague and really only guaranteed mutual consultation on important questions of foreign policy. The immediate future was to prove that the new Dreikaiserbundnis rested on very shaky foundations but to outside observers in 1874 the grouping appeared ominous. Britain in particular, was uneasily aware that it gave Russia virtually a free hand in the East, and she could not help but view Russian activities there with considerable alarm. Russia had now restored her power on the Black Sea and begun a menacing Panslavonic propaganda which had lost the earlier social and religious basis of the Panslavist movement and instead was beginning to stand out for the destruction of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires through the military might of Russia. Tsar Alexander and his Foreign Minister Prince Gortchakoff, were Western European rather than Panslavist in their outlook, but Panslavism had power-

ful connections within the Muscovite nobility, the Orthodox church, the court, the diplomatic service and the army. The authority of the Tsarist autocracy had been shaken somewhat by the emancipation of the Russian serfs in 1861 and the Tsar was not always going to be able to ignore the sentiments of the Panslavists.[1] To Britain, the threat was personified in Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatyev, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople. A rabid Panslavist, Ignatyev explained in his memoirs that he felt Russian diplomacy should have three aims in the Near East: the revision of the 1856 Treaty of Paris to permit a collective guardianship of Turkey by the powers; control of the Straits and Constantinople; and a collective foreign policy by the other Slav states and Russia under Russian direction.[2]

To make matters worse, Britain's position in 1874 was not a strong one. With the temporary crippling of France, Britain had been left without a powerful ally in Europe at a time when her prestige abroad was exceptionally low. She had been virtually disregarded during the Franco-Prussian War and, in 1871, had allowed Russia to tear up the Black Sea Clauses of the Treaty of Paris. To cap the situation, the United States had been able to secure fifteen million,

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1. For an authoritative analysis of Panslavism, see B.H. Sumner, Russia and the Balkans 1870-80, pp.56-80.
2. Ibid, p.74.

five hundred thousand pounds in damages from Britain for her negligence during the American Civil War. If Britain's apparent power was diminished, her effective military resources were also depleted. Technical superiority in naval matters was lagging and little had been accomplished since 1856 to repair the inadequacies of military organisation revealed in the Crimean campaign. In addition, the Liberal government had introduced strict measures of economy in 1868 and in the following two years disbanded a considerable portion of the army reserves.

When Disraeli assumed office in 1874 an uneasy calm pervaded the international scene but he was in no doubt that a serious confrontation lay ahead. Speaking in a debate on the question of Irish Home Rule in July 1874, Disraeli stated that he was opposed to Home Rule because he felt the need for a united people "at this important crisis of the world - that perhaps is nearer arriving than some of us suppose."[1] Despite a growing mutual distrust, Britain and Russia began in 1874 a genuine effort to improve their relations. The Tsar's only daughter, Marie, married the Duke of Edinburgh on 7 March. This was followed by Tsar Alexander's state visit to London in May 1874. Before he left, the Queen, acting on the advice of Lord Derby, the

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1. 2 Jul 1874, M & B, v, p.336.

Foreign Secretary, expressed to the Emperor her desire for a frank and free exchange of ideas between the two states to avoid misunderstandings. This desire Alexander reciprocated. Disraeli welcomed this gesture only because it would give Britain time for the "settling and strengthening" of her frontiers. He had no faith in "a real understanding,"[1] with Russia as to British Eastern possessions. Trouble, Disraeli was sure, was on the way and it promised to come from the Eastern quarter.

It is widely acknowledged that Disraeli did bring a new determination and a more positive approach to British foreign policy, since the days of Palmerston. The Liberals, and the Conservatives when in office, had tended to drift with the tide of international events. With Disraeli comes the end to what Seton-Watson terms a "long and not very edifying period of isolation and non-intervention."[2] Although his old colleague, Lord Derby, was Foreign Secretary, initiative in foreign affairs came from Disraeli and his domination of foreign affairs increased as time and events proved Derby to be indisposed to practically any form of positive action. By the time Lord Salisbury replaced Derby at the end of March 1878, Disraeli had become virtually his own Foreign Secretary. He was determined to act positively to reassert

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1. Disraeli to Salisbury, 2 Jun 1874, M & B, v, p.416.
2. R.W.Seton-Watson, Disraeli, Gladstone and the Eastern Question, p.3.

British influence with Europe and to safeguard the Empire from the dangers which appeared to threaten. It does appear, though, that he was a good deal more sure of what he wished to achieve and the manner in which Britain should act, than just where and how action should begin. Except for a moderate increase in naval and military expenditure at the beginning of 1874, his foreign policy until the opening of the Eastern Question consisted largely of seizing opportunities as they arose. 1874 was a relatively tranquil year abroad and Disraeli devoted his attention to domestic politics. 1875 and 1876 gave him more chance to demonstrate to all that there was a new and very different spirit behind British foreign policy.

In May 1875 it appeared that Germany might wage a preventive war upon a rapidly recovering France to cripple her more permanently. The truculent tones of the German press made it also appear possible that Germany would make Belgian protests against Bismarck's policy towards the Catholic Papacy an excuse for ignoring Belgian neutrality. The Russian Emperor and Prince Gortchakoff visited Berlin at this critical time and spoke earnestly of peace to Bismarck and Emperor William. Disraeli persuaded Derby to associate Britain with the Russian mediation. If Bismarck really did contemplate war, and this has not been conclusively proved, he now reconsidered his policy and the situation calmed.

Disraeli was very pleased with the results of the British move. Bismarck in 1874 had tended to regard Britain as a somewhat negligible quantity although he was friendly enough towards the new government. Disraeli at the beginning of 1875 seems to have entertained hopes of some sort of Anglo-German cooperation in international affairs. In February he assured Count Munster, the German Ambassador in London, that he had never believed in France as a sincere ally of England and that "the only people who could go hand in hand were Germany and England."[1] Disraeli was well aware that a German alliance would make the future very much less difficult for Britain. However, as the German menace to both France and Belgium became more apparent through March and April, he became convinced that "Bismarck is really another old Bonaparte again and he must be bridled."[2] To this end, Britain should construct "some concerted movement to preserve the peace of Europe" and Disraeli showed again that he was no Russophobe by suggesting that an Anglo-Russian alliance might be the basis of such a movement.[3]

The outcome of the War Scare was doubly beneficial to Britain in Disraeli's eyes. On the one hand it heralded the return of England to the European scene. Bismarck seems to

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1. Munster to Bismarck, 28 Feb 1875, Seton-Watson, p.11. Originally cited by W.Taffs, The War Scare, i, p.341.
2. Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield, 7 May 1875, Zetland, i, p.235.
3. Disraeli to Derby, 6 May 1875, M & B, v, p.422

have been surprised rather than affronted by British intervention and addressed a letter of thanks to Derby and Disraeli expressing his pleasure that England was taking an interest once more in continental affairs.[1] On the other hand, Bismarck was not so well pleased with the well publicized claim of the Russian Chancellor, Gortchakoff, that he had personally secured the peace. Bismarck felt a public affront had been administered to him in his own capital and nursed ill-feeling for Gortchakoff that lasted through to the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. A split in the Dreikaiserbundnis had thus appeared as a result of the Scare while British relations with both countries had improved. Actually, the British action probably contributed very little towards deciding Bismarck in favour of peace. Nonetheless, Disraeli can be excused for his elation with the rewards of his first real excursion into the European arena.

In November 1875, Britain purchased forty per cent. of the ordinary shares of the Suez Canal Company. This was a sensational coup illustrating in a very favourable light Disraeli's boldness and ability to grasp an opportunity. Buckle is of the opinion that he had become interested in gaining some measure of control over the Canal early in 1874.

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1. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 14 May 1875, Zetland, i, p.241

In April of that year Ferdinand de Lesseps, head of the French Company which was the proprietor of the Canal, endeavoured to raise the Canal charges in an effort to make it a paying proposition. He was induced to abandon the idea after the Khedive of Egypt, with the backing of the European powers, mobilized 10,000 troops to evict the Company if the charges were not lowered to the original level. At this stage, Disraeli tried to purchase control of the Canal from the Company, working through the private agency of the Rothschild family. Suitable terms could not be arranged and although contact was maintained with de Lesseps over the next two years nothing came of further negotiations.[1] The opportunity to gain a significant, although not a controlling, interest in the Canal came instead from the Khedive of Egypt who held 177,000 out of 400,000 ordinary shares. Faced with financial difficulties, he was negotiating for their transfer to a syndicate of French capitalists. Immediately he became aware of this situation,[2] Disraeli was eager that the British government should step in and secure the shares. The Khedive gave priority to the French syndicate but it was unable to raise the necessary capital and de Lesseps was forced to appeal to the French

1. Speech in the House, Feb 1875, 3 Hansard 227 Col.95-99.
2. 15 Nov 1875 Lord Derby was notified of the situation by F.Greenwood, editor of the Pall Mall Gazette, M & B, v, p.439.

government for support. The French government refused to back the syndicate. France was still grateful to Britain for her help over the War Scare and the Foreign Minister, Duc Decazes, inquired what the British reaction would be if he and his government supported the syndicate. With uncharacteristic forthrightness, Derby replied that Britain "would certainly be opposed to these shares falling into the hands of another French Company."[1] The Khedive then turned to Britain and on 26 November the deal was completed at a cost of four million pounds. Parliament being in recess, the money was borrowed from the Rothschild family at two and a half per cent. until a parliamentary grant could be made. This was rather an exorbitant rate of interest, being approximately thirteen per cent. per annum, and this particular aspect of the transaction was to be hotly criticised in the House.

Everything had gone well for Disraeli and he was jubilant. He certainly did not prove reluctant to accept the plaudits he considered rightfully his. With a disregard for the true facts of the situation which is hardly creditable, he assured Victoria that the French government had been "out generaled"[2] and described to Lady Bradford the

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1. Speech by Disraeli in the House, 8 Feb 1875, 3 Hansard 227 Col.99.
2. Disraeli to Victoria, 24 Nov 1875, M & B, v, p.448.

manner in which he had outwitted "all the gamblers, capitalists, financiers of the world, organized and platooned into bands of plunderers arrayed against us and secret emissaries in every corner."[1] He was particularly pleased with the effect of the news upon Prince Bismarck and felt that it had shown both Russia and Germany they could not settle the Eastern Question without Britain.[2] Whatever else happened, Disraeli obviously intended to act spectacularly.

More significant are the reasons which Disraeli advanced in the House of Commons for the purchase. By the beginning of 1876 he was increasingly preoccupied with the steadily deteriorating situation in the Near East and the transaction had, he felt, contributed significantly to the security of British interests there. It provided a further illustration to the powers abroad of the new purpose of British foreign policy and emphasised to Russia, Austria and Germany that Britain must be considered and consulted before a settlement could be reached in the Near East. But more had been accomplished than this. The Suez Canal, Disraeli told the House, was "absolutely indispensable" to England's political, no less than her commercial, connection with the East.[3] "...we must look at it, not as a commercial but as a political

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1. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 25 Nov 1875, Zetland, i, p.308.
2. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 30 Nov 1875, ibid, p.308.
3. 8 Feb 1875, 3 Hansard 227 Col.54.

transaction." The purchase was, in fact, a real step towards ensuring the security of the Indian Empire. "It will now be clearly understood that England considers India a vital part of the Empire", stated Disraeli to the House, and it would be clear to all that Britain would not shrink "from any effort or any sacrifice that may be necessary for its preservation."[1] In other words, by buying the shares, Britain had issued a clear warning to Europe that she would resist any policies which might endanger her interests in the East.

Moreover, the Suez Canal was strategically a valuable link "in the great chain of fortresses which we possess, almost from the metropolis to India."[2] Disraeli did not begin to believe in 1876 that Britain possessed a chain of Mediterranean garrisons securing her connection with India through the Suez. This was something he had believed in for a considerable time. It was, nevertheless, a myth. Admittedly, Britain did hold Gibraltar, Malta and Aden and did exercise considerable influence in Persia, but the distances involved made it a mistake to construe these possessions as giving Britain a line of almost unbroken authority from England to India. Right or wrong, however, it is important to remember that Disraeli did believe in the idea. The conception was basic to his conviction that

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1. 8 Feb 1875, 3 Hansard 227 Cols.65-66.
2. 21 Feb 1875, ibid, Col.100.

Russian dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire would threaten Britain's Imperial dominion. Disraeli believed that this would break the chain tying London to Calcutta. The importance Disraeli attached to the Indian Empire was underlined by another proposal outlined in the Queen's Address. It was proposed that an addition to the Royal Title was necessary to denote the new relationship between India and the English Sovereign since the government of British India had been brought directly under the Crown in 1858. Disraeli had insisted then on the importance of establishing personal contact between the Indian people and their Sovereign[1] but immediately after the bloodshed of the Mutiny hardly seemed a propitious time for this. The idea was not forgotten and Disraeli had mentioned it in a letter to Queen Victoria at the beginning of his ministry.[2] He accepted the Prince of Wales' offer to visit India at the end of 1875 as another opportunity to personalize the relationship between the Crown and the Indian people and he insisted that this visit be associated with the Titles proposal in the Queen's speech so the two would appear as a "deep and organized policy."[3] Actually, the initiative for the announcement of the proposal at the beginning of 1876 came from the Queen herself. At this time Disraeli probably felt that external affairs were

1. Speech in the House, 27 Jul 1857, M & B, iv, p.92.
2. Disraeli to Victoria, 14 Apr 1874, M & B, v, p.457.
3. Disraeli to Salisbury, 11 Jan 1876, ibid.

sufficiently complicated already, but "the Empress-Queen" demanded "her Imperial Crown".[1] Disraeli gave way with no great reluctance, expecting the Bill to pass easily through parliament. In fact, it met with spirited opposition both from the House and from some conservatives outside the House. Even some of Disraeli's own party were opposed to the move. Many felt that the new title would tarnish the grand old title of King or Queen and others found unpleasant connotations in the title of Empress.

To Disraeli the opposition had mistaken the intention of the move to extend the title. Speaking at the second reading on the Bill he outlined the government's motives more clearly. The new title would, he claimed, give assurance to the people of India of the esteem in which Britain held her Indian Empire. Some such reassurance was necessary at this time as the Russian advance in Central Asia was giving cause for alarm to the ruling classes of India. The Royal Title Bill would also give a further warning to Russia of the inviolability of India. Disraeli was careful to stress that Asia was "large enough for the destinies of both Russia and England." This conciliatory tone was logical enough if it is remembered that Disraeli still hoped to obviate the Russian threat to the Empire

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1. Disraeli to Cairns, 7 Jan 1876, M & B, v, p.457.

by an alliance with her.[1] He continued in a much firmer vein:

> empires are only maintained by vigilance, by firmness, by courage, by understanding the temper of the times in which we live, and by watching those significant indications that may easily be observed.

By adopting the title of Empress, the Queen would reassure the people of India and it would "be spoken in language which cannot be mistaken, that the Parliament of England has resolved to uphold the Empire of India."[2]

Such a warning was necessary in view of the developing situation in Central Asia. Russian expansion had proceeded apace through the 1860's. One after another the decadent Tartar and Turcoman states which lay between Siberia in the North and Persia, Afghanistan and India in the South, were annexed. It was difficult for Britain to complain at this since Russia could claim that her expansion had a civilizing influence over her new territories and this was virtually the same argument Britain had used to excuse her own expansion in Asia in the first half of the century. By 1874, fears were being held, especially by certain of the Anglo-Indian contingent such as Sir Henry Rawlinson and Sir Bartle Frere, that Afghanistan and Persia would also come under Russian domination. This, it appeared, would put Russia in a position

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1. See Disraeli's overture to Count Shuvalov, 9 Jun 1876; Seton-Watson, pp.40-44.
2. M & B, v, pp.465-6.

to exert pressure directly upon the Indian frontiers. In 1873 Britain had secured an agreement with the Russians recognizing the Afghan frontier along the line of the Oxus river. The Russian agreement was due to a desire to secure a free hand elsewhere and in the following spring, Khiva was captured. Despite earlier assurances from the Tsar that the Russian intention was only to punish brigandage in the city, Khiva was annexed. These events were remote from Afghanistan but were still taken by many of the Anglo-Indian Brigade to signal the untrustworthiness of the Russians and their dangerous intentions. Their fears were lent a certain amount of colour by the writings of certain Russian extremists like Terentyev. In his book, Russia and England, he claimed that in the event of a European war, Russia would be able to use her position in Central Asia to threaten India and alarm the British.[1] The Tsar's assurances of the innocence of Russian intentions appeared of little value as it was obvious that the central government of Russia had virtually lost control of the general staff in Asia. As the Indian authorities realized, the fall of Khiva had changed the centre of gravity of Central Asian affairs from the mountains of Afghan to the Persian and Turkoman plain. The great fortress of Herat was now the "key" not only to

1. For a fuller discussion of the anti-British extremism of this work, see Sumner, pp.41-3.

"western Afghanistan, Kabul and so to India; but also to Kandahar and the Persian Gulf."[1]

Thus, when Disraeli assumed office, Russia was established along two axes of Central Asian territory down to Krasnovodsk along the Caspian in the west and down to Bokhara along the Oxus in the east. At this stage, Persia and Afghanistan appeared the only buffer states left to British India and Disraeli feared that they too were "broken reeds".[2] Salisbury, along with other sensible authorities, discarded the possibility of a Russian invasion into India through Afghanistan as impractical. However, Russian ascendancy in Afghanistan would lead to a dangerous confrontation between Russia and Britain. Moreover, Russia would be in a position to place pressure on the northern frontier by encouraging raids by the Afghans and by fostering revolts in Northern India which could penetrate into the plains. Memories of the Indian Mutiny were still very green after twenty years. Disraeli seems to have taken a similar line. He believed that Asia was big enough for both Britain and Russia and there is no mention of an actual Russian invasion of India but he was convinced that Afghanistan provided a vital buffer between their different interests and guaranteed Indian security.

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1. A.P.Thornton, "Afghanistan in Anglo-Russian Diplomacy 1869-73", Cambridge Historical Journal, ii, 1953-5, p.218.
2. Disraeli to Salisbury, 15 Oct 1874, M & B, v, p.427.

Relations between the Amir of Afghan, Sher Ali, and the Indian government were at this time on a rather precarious footing. The Indian government had stood passively by during the 1860's while Sher Ali fought to secure his throne. Despite this, Sher Ali had looked to the British for a positive reassurance of the sovereignty of his state after the capture of Samarkand in 1868 by the Russians brought them dangerously close to the Oxus. Both Lord Mayo and Lord Northbrook as successive Viceroys had been in favour of giving aid to Afghanistan but the British Cabinet remained unalarmed. Discouraged, Sher Ali had begun to direct his attention more towards the Russians. This appeared a dangerous situation to Disraeli and he strongly supported Lord Salisbury, Secretary of State for India, when he suggested that in order to reassert British influence over the Amir, it was vital that the Indian government should be represented at the Amir's court.[1] Lord Northbrook was against such a proposal as he felt the Amir would refuse to accept a British mission and this would lead to an open breach with Afghanistan. Northbrook was to resign in November 1875 because of his disagreement with the policy of the Conservative Cabinet, but his point of view does seem to have made an impression on Disraeli. He remained convinced that Britain should act "with energy and promptitude in the direction of Herat." On the

1. Disraeli to Salisbury, 6 Jan 1875, M & B, v, p.427.

other hand he feared that if Britain tried to force herself upon Afghanistan, Russia would be able to step in, ostensibly on Afghanistan's behalf. A "bona fide understanding" with Afghanistan would help "not only to secure our Empire, but to preserve their independence" but Disraeli found himself in an impasse as to how this was to be achieved.[1] The impasse was to be broken for better or worse by Disraeli's appointment of Lord Lytton as Viceroy in Lord Northbrook's place.

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It is clear, therefore, that in his first two years of office Disraeli did not lose sight of the issues which had been the basis of his criticisms of the foreign policies of the preceding Liberal government. His association of Britain with Russian mediation over the War Scare proved to Europe that Britain was now determined to act forcefully to safeguard European peace and British interests. The War Scare and the spectacular Suez Coup of the same year did much to raise British influence and prestige abroad from the nadir of 1871. Britain was now acting in the manner of a great power. Yet, Disraeli also made it clear this was not to

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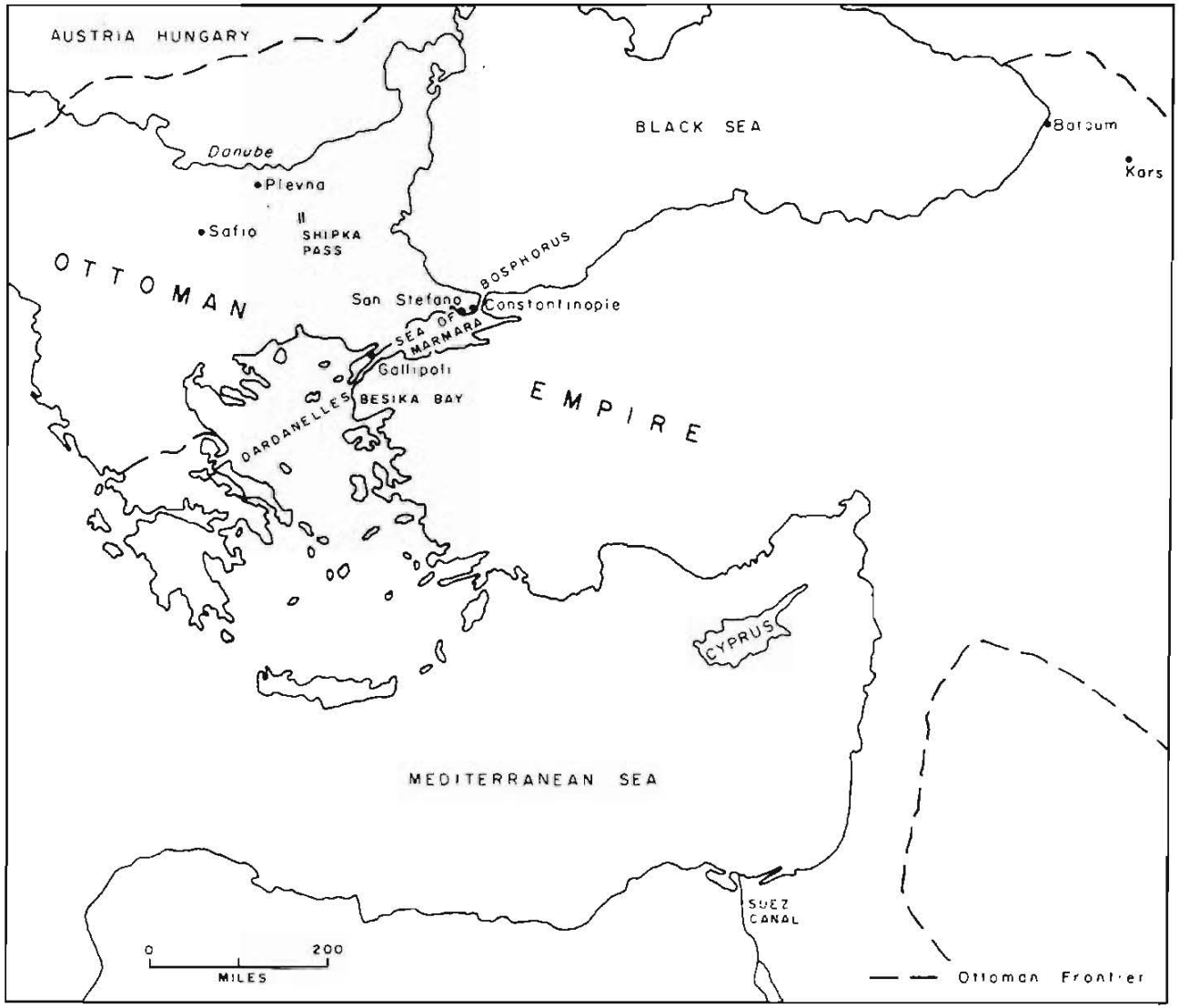
1. Disraeli to Salisbury, 15 Oct 1875, M & B, v, p.433.

mean meddling in the domestic affairs of other nations. When the chaos of Republican administration in Spain led to a strong move for the restoration of the Bourbons, culminating in the crowning of Alphonso as king in January 1875, Disraeli persuaded the Queen that England should remain upon the sideline. Britain should act only when her own interests were threatened, but then she must act effectively and without hesitation.

For this reason, Britain must act in the East for the threat to her Empire there seemed to be growing. From the Ottoman Empire through Persia to Afghanistan, Russia was exerting increasing pressure upon the buffer regions Disraeli felt to be vital for the protection of Britain's connection with India through the Suez Canal. If the connection was broken, the basis of Britain's overseas empire would be in danger. The purchase of the Suez shares and the Royal Titles Bill had helped in Disraeli's eyes both to secure the connection and to advertise abroad Britain's determination to maintain her Eastern Empire whatever the cost. Coupled with the reassertion of British influence in Europe, it was now obvious that no settlement of the Eastern Question could be achieved without British participation. Thus, Disraeli could feel he had done something to prepare Britain for the crisis to come but he was still aware that the crisis had

THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE IN 1874



CHAPTER III: THE EASTERN QUESTION PART I.

"I am persuaded that Russia will make another move on the board within about six months" Disraeli wrote to Lord Derby in January 1871 following the Russian repudiation of the Black Sea Clauses. It was not an accurate forecast. Although Russian activities in Central Asia and the increasingly militaristic overtones of Panslavist propaganda maintained Disraeli's fears of Russian expansion, the situation in the Near East remained calm for the next four years. Then, at the end of 1875, the Ottoman Empire, quite suddenly, appeared to be collapsing. The crisis Disraeli had predicted seemed to have arrived.

The Eastern Question did not re-open dramatically. Revolt had broken out in the European Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina in July 1875, but such disturbances were not uncommon in this area as the situation was a particularly explosive one. This resulted from the administrative incompetence of the Porte combined with the very difficult social and religious cleavage: the subjected peasant classes were Christian in religion, their landowning ruling class predominantly Moslem. Friction was aggravated because the subjected population was of almost pure Serbian blood and possessed an abiding hatred for the Turkish

nationality of many of their ruling class.

Consequently, Disraeli did not view the beginnings of the revolt with excessive alarm. It seemed simply a matter of domestic politics which the Turks would be well capable of dealing with themselves, and when it was proposed that the Consuls of the great powers should be authorized to attempt mediation between the Porte and the insurgent chiefs, both Derby and Disraeli were reluctant to co-operate. However, the Porte itself expressly requested British co-operation with the mediation and Disraeli saw no alternative to consenting. He was not pleased, though, to be involved in a matter he considered best solved without outside intervention.[1]

Disraeli's confidence in Turkey's ability to settle revolts by herself was rudely shattered in October 1875 when the Sultan announced he could pay only fifty per cent. of interest on the public debt. With the insurrections spreading, and Turkey apparently incapable of coping with them, the whole structure of the Ottoman Empire was tottering. Clearly, the Eastern Question was re-opened, and this was no longer merely a matter of Turkish domestic politics. Disraeli was not sorry. The chance to play the role of a true statesman and solve the problem "that has haunted Europe for a century" clearly appealed to him.[2] He persuaded

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1. Telegraph to Derby, 24 Aug 1875, M & B, vi, p.12.
2. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 3 Nov 1875, ibid, p.14.

Derby that Turkish affairs should not be dealt with in Cabinet but by the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary personally. Salisbury was also persuaded to manage Central Asian affairs with Disraeli instead of within the Cabinet.[1] Having assured himself of the initiative in Britain's policy in the East, Disraeli lost no time in announcing that he intended Britain to play a leading role in any settlement of the question. Britain's interest in the matter was not readily apparent in view of her geographical position and her comparative isolation from European politics in the previous fifteen years, but to Disraeli it was quite clear. Speaking at Guildhall on 9 November 1876, he stressed that, while the interests of the imperial powers in this question might be more direct, they were not more considerable. The British government was "deeply conscious of the nature and magnitude of those British interests, and those British interests they are resolved to guard and maintain."[2] It was soon to be clear that the British interest involved, as far as Disraeli was concerned, the security of the Indian Empire.

Disraeli was not unaware that there were problems in the way of Britain assuming the dominant role in bringing a settlement in the East. The Franco-Prussian War had left Britain dangerously isolated and Disraeli felt a lack of

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1. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 4 Nov 1875, M & B, vi, p.15.
2. Ibid, p.16.

"balance" in European politics since 1871. If Britain did not act with Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary, they could ignore her because of her isolation. If, on the other hand, she chose to act with them, Disraeli felt Britain would be reduced to a secondary role. There were two objections to this. Firstly, it did not, as he informed Queen Victoria, "become your Majesty" and, because there would be no counter to the interests of the Dreikaiserbund, it could lead to wars "which are neither just nor necessary."[1] Secondly, Britain would not be in a position to secure the integrity of the Ottoman Empire in Europe which seemed to Disraeli a vital security to the British connection with India. Thus, Disraeli feared that the defeat of France in the Franco-German war of 1870-1871 would "ultimately drive the Turk from Europe."[2] This problem remained with Disraeli until the signing of the Treaty of Berlin in 1878. On the one hand, he was endeavouring to assume an independent British policy in the East which would secure what he felt to be Britain's interests in the East. On the other hand, Disraeli was constantly wooing one or other of the three members of the Dreikaiserbund because he realized that Britain would be unlikely to secure a lasting and favourable

1. Disraeli to Victoria, 7 Jun 1876, G.E.Buckle (ed), The Letters of Queen Victoria, ii, p.457.
2. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 6 Aug 1875, M & B, vi, p.13.

settlement without the support of at least one other great power. Disraeli's foreign policy until the Treaty of Berlin was designed with a view to the situation in the East. Throughout, he was always hopeful of an understanding with Bismarck, leader of the nation least interested in the Eastern Question. In June 1876 Disraeli even approached Russia in an effort to achieve an agreement over the Turkish problem. He disliked and distrusted Count Andrassy of Austria but overcame this to make constant overtures to him throughout 1877. In the meantime, however, Britain had to act alone.

The first serious attempt taken by the great powers to restore peace in Bosnia and Herzgovina was the Andrassy Note. This was drawn up by the Austrian Foreign Minister and the Russian ambassador in Vienna. It was circulated to the capitals of Europe at the end of December 1875. The Note contained a list of internal reforms to be carried out in the rebellious areas in order to secure peace. Although approved by the powers and presented to the Porte, it achieved nothing. The situation continued to worsen and Serbia and Montenegro were now obviously preparing to come to the support of their Slav brethren. Tension was heightened by the murder of the French and German Consuls at Salonika by Moslems on 6 May 1876. Following this, Bismarck, Gortchakoff and Andrassy met at Berlin and drew up a fresh set of proposals which the

other powers were then invited to sign. This document, the Berlin Memorandum, pledged the powers in the last resort to reinforce diplomatic action by "efficacious" measures.

Disraeli's attitude to these two documents is illuminating. He was exceedingly reluctant to support the Andrassy Note and only agreed to do so when asked to by Turkey. He refused to sanction the Berlin Memorandum at all and the rejection of the Memorandum by Britain was followed by the despatch of British warships to Besika Bay on 24 May 1876, ostensibly as a measure of precaution against the revolution spreading to Constantinople. These actions have been strongly criticised on the grounds that they made concerted action by the European powers impossible and encouraged Turkey to believe that Britain was prepared to support her as in Crimea.[1]

A number of explanations have been put forward for Disraeli's policy at this time. Blake considers that Disraeli was annoyed because Britain had not been consulted over the drawing up of either of the documents in question and seized the opportunity to both "have a hit at the Dreikaiserbund, and to make an emphatic assertion of British independence."[2] There is a considerable measure of truth in this. Writing to the Queen at the beginning of June 1876, Disraeli described British actions as having formed "a policy of determination"

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1. Seton-Watson, p.35.
2. Blake, p.588.

which would help to bring

> the preservation of European peace and, at the same time, the restoration of your Majesty's influence in the general councils which, for some years, has not been so marked as could be desired.[1]

Disraeli was equally sure that Britain was a great European power and that he was a notable statesman. It was against his whole nature to play a secondary role in anything. Seton-Watson is probably also correct in attributing part of Disraeli's lack of sympathy for the insurgents to a fear of creating precedents for the Irish agrarian campaign.[2]

But these provide only a partial explanation for Disraeli's actions. One cannot exclude as a basis of his policy the conviction that the Ottoman Empire provided a vital neutral buffer for British interests through the Meditteranean and Suez to India. Disraeli's suspicions of Russian intentions towards Turkey had not lessened since 1871. He was convinced that any intervention in Turkish affairs by Russia was designed to gain political domination over Constantinople and threaten the connection with India. Throughout the following two years, he believed that "the Emperor of Russia...and all his court would don the turban tomorrow, if he could only build a Kremlin on the Bosphorous."[3] Disraeli feared the Andrassy

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1. Disraeli to Victoria, 7 Jun 1876, Letters, ii, p.457.
2. Seton-Watson, p.22.
3. Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield, 20 Oct 1876, Zetland, ii, pp.82-3.

Note might furnish a pretext for Russian intervention in Turkey. The Turkish government was too weak, above all financially, to enforce the reforms contained in the Note in the rebellious provinces against the opposition of its own officials. In any case, most of the reforms had already been conceded in theory by the Sultan. The danger was that after the Andrassy Note had failed to have any effect, "then Austria and Russia, who probably contemplate an ulterior policy or should do so, will turn around on the other Powers and say, 'The advice you gave has been rejected, you are bound to see it is carried into effect'".[1] Disraeli was forced to sanction the Note by the Turkish request that he should do so. "We can't be more Turkish than the Sultan",[2] he wrote to Lady Bradford, but he was unhappy to be associated with any move which could lead to an infringement of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire.

The Berlin Memorandum with its threat of "efficacious" measures appeared even more ominous. The Memorandum reached Britain in the middle of May 1876 and Disraeli saw it immediately as an attempt to draw Britain into a scheme designed to end in the disintegration of Turkey.[3] He explained his view to the Queen later in the month, claiming

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1. Disraeli to Derby, 9 Jan 1876, M & B, vi, p.18.
2. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 18 Jan 1876, Zetland, ii, p.11.
3. Note for Cabinet, 16 May 1876, M & B, vi, pp.24-5.

that if Britain had supported the Memorandum, "Constantinople would, at this moment, have been garrisoned by Russia and the Turkish fleet placed under Russian protection." Thus, Britain had refused to sanction the Memorandum. But, "Your Majesty's fleet has not been ordered to the Mediterranean to protect the Christians or Turks, but to uphold your Majesty's Empire."[1] In Disraeli's eyes, therefore, there was a clear link between the maintenance of the Empire and the preservation of the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, in particular the crucial city of Constantinople. For a period following the Bulgarian Atrocities and again after the failure of the Conference of Constantinople, Disraeli found the forces of political opinion within Britain so solidly arrayed against him that he was forced to entertain schemes of partition with regard to the European provinces of the Turkish Empire. Even then he would not accede to any idea which would place the city of Constantinople in the hands of another power. The maintenance of the independence of this city, and thus preventing control of the Dardanelles falling into the hands of Russia, remained always the cornerstone of his Eastern policy. To Disraeli Constantinople, not Egypt, was "the key of India."[2]

This was a very dubious premise upon which to base his

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1. Disraeli to Victoria, 29 May 1876, Letters, ii, p.455.
2. Memorandum by Lord Barrington, 23 Oct 1876, M & B, vi, p.84.

policy. Constantinople is over 1000 miles from Suez by sea and considerably more overland. Salisbury's appreciation of the situation seems a more logical one. He concurred that the government of Turkey must not be allowed to come under the control of another stronger power, for Britain's road to India did indeed lie through regions subject to the Sultan's suzerainty, but felt that this did not necessarily mean that Britain was bound to uphold the Ottoman Empire. In Salisbury's eyes, the problem could be best solved by the elimination of Turkey as a sovereign state.[1] Disraeli, however, insisted on seeing the fall of Turkey as leading to Russia placing direct military pressure on the Indian connection.

> If the Russians had Constantinople, they could at any time march their army through Syria to the mouth of the Nile, and then what would be the use of our holding Egypt? Not even the command of the sea would help us under such circumstances. People who talk in this manner must be utterly ignorant of geography. Our strength is on the sea. Constantinople is the key of India, and not Egypt and the Suez Canal. 2

Critics might justifiably argue that it was Disraeli who was "utterly ignorant of geography" as the march he feared would have been virtually impossible for a large expeditionary force. The real flaw of his policy though, is that it was designed to meet a threat which did not really exist. At

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1. Lady Gwendolen Cecil, Life of Robert, Marquis of Salisbury, ii, p.79.
2. Memorandum by Lord Barrington, 23 Oct 1876, M & B, vi, p.84.

the time Disraeli opposed the Berlin Memorandum, Russia had no intention of seizing Constantinople. Later, during the Russo-Turkish war when the influence of Panslavism and of the military leaders was at its height, official opinion did incline to the view that it might be necessary to seize the city in order to force a settlement on the Turks. Admittedly, Tsar Alexander tended to vacillate somewhat in his outlook, at times appearing more aggressive and militaristic than on other occasions. Also, General Ignatyev at Constantinople frankly aimed at the overthrow of Turkish power in the Balkans and at Russian seizure of the straits, and this probably misled Disraeli as to the policy of the Russian government. But there was not a shred of evidence that Russia ever had any intention of threatening the British regime in India. The only Russians who ever suggested such a course were extremists, completely divorced in their outlook from official policy. Disraeli's policy in the Near East was consistent and, ultimately, successful in achieving its aims, but it was based on a premise of very dubious validity.

It would be unfair, though, to place the blame for this misunderstanding of the situation completely on Disraeli's shoulders. His own longstanding suspicions of Russia were constantly strengthened by the Turcophil reports of Sir Henry

Elliot at Constantinople. Elliot was surpassed in his bias only by some of his Consuls. Holmes in Sarajevo, for example, reported the Bosnian insurrections as "an invasion of bands openly formed in Austria, Croatia and Serbia."[1]

Much of the aggressiveness of Disraeli's policy at the time of his rejection of the Berlin Memorandum can also be explained by such misinformation. At the end of April, news reached St. Petersburg that Turkey was preparing to attack Montenegro. The Tsar warned Turkey strongly against this and it appeared that the possibility of Russia playing a lone hand had increased. Disraeli appears to have been given the impression that General Ignatyev was trying to induce "the frightened Sultan to admit a Russian garrison" to Constantinople "and place his fleet under the guardianship of Russia."[2] Firm steps were therefore necessary. Disraeli pressed Derby to give secret instructions to the Admiral of the Fleet off Besika to warn any of the naval forces assembled if they proposed to violate the Treaty of 1841 and enter the Dardanelles, that he was instructed to maintain that Treaty by force if necessary. He did not consider, as Derby did, that such instructions would lead to war. Rather, "it should mean peace not war."[3] If the

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1. Seton-Watson, p.29.
2. Disraeli to Derby, 28 May 1876, M & B, vi, p.29.
3. Disraeli to Derby, 31 May 1876, ibid, p.30.

other powers knew that Britain was ready to resist any move which threatened her interests, Disraeli was convinced they would not push the matter to war. Whatever happened, he was convinced that Britain must avoid the policy of drift which he felt had led the Aberdeen Coalition into the Crimean War. By acting firmly and positively, British interests could be safeguarded while peace was maintained, and Her Majesty "restored to her due and natural influence in the government of the world."[1]

Initially his policy appeared to be succeeding. On 29 May 1876 the half-sane, extravagant Sultan Abdul Aziz was deposed by his nephew Murad. The new Sultan, with his minister Midhat Pasha put forward a programme of constitutional reform and friendly cooperation with the foreign powers, especially England. As a result, Austria, Germany and Russia were persuaded to withdraw the Berlin Memorandum and it seemed Britain had been right to wait. Disraeli was very pleased with events and had high hopes that a settlement could now be reached without the intervention of the powers. Moreover, the great powers of Europe, when they withdrew the Memorandum, appeared to be following the British lead in the East. Britain was still without an ally but Disraeli felt

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1. Beaconsfield to Lord John Manners, 7 Jun 1876, M & B, vi, p.31

certain the Tripartite Alliance was "virtually extinct."[1] "I like the look of things," he wrote to Lady Bradford, "and should not be surprised if I accomplished exactly and entirely, all I intended."[2] British influence over the other powers was restored at least for the moment and the integrity of the Ottoman Empire appeared safe.

Unfortunately, things now began to go wrong for Disraeli. On 9 June 1876 he approached Shuvalov with the view of securing an arrangement with Russia over the Eastern Question. This was to inaugurate a "new policy", the basis of which was to be a mutual guarantee of non-interference in each others Asian interests.[3] By 24 June 1876 Disraeli had abandoned all hopes of such an agreement. This change in the attitude he held was probably due to a report he had received in the meantime from Monson, First Secretary of the British embassy at Vienna. Monson, after visiting the scene of the insurrections, sent home a report claiming "had it not been for the money spent by Russia and by Dalmatian Panslavist committees upon certain influential chiefs, the insurrection would long since have collapsed."[4] Disraeli's reaction is not recorded, but for the time being he discarded the possibility of an Anglo-Russian alliance.

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1. Disraeli to Victoria, 7 Jun 1876, Letters, ii, pp.457-8.
2. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 7 Jun 1876, Zetland, ii, p.52.
3. Disraeli speaking to Shuvalov, 9 Jun 1876, Seton-Watson, p.41.
4. Monson to Derby, 14 Jun 1876, Sumner, p.155.

This disappointment was followed by the development of another complication. On 30 June 1876 Serbia declared war on Turkey and the danger of Russia's coming to Serbia's aid and attacking Turkey immediately arose. However, Russia held back although large numbers of Russian volunteers did leave Russia to join the Serbian forces. By 9 July 1876 Disraeli was confident that "the infamous invasion of the Servians" would be over before the end of the month. He felt the other powers had held back from intervening out of deference to Britain and reflected complacently that "something like the old days of our authority appear to have returned."[1]

His complacency was short-lived for, on 23 June 1876 the Daily News published the first details of the horrors which were to become known as the Bulgarian Atrocities. Unrest in European Turkey had spread to Bulgaria before the close of April and an insurrection had broken out in the mountainous district of Philippopolis beginning with the massacre of a number of local Turkish officials. The Turkish government, with its hands already full in Herzegovina, appears to have been panic stricken by this further rebellion close to the capital. As a result, it enrolled as regular troops a number of Circassians who were colonized in the province

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1. Disraeli to Lady Chesterfield, M & B, vi, p.37.

and permitted them to deal with the predominantly unarmed and innocent peasantry as they wished. It is estimated that somewhere around 12,000 people were killed in the frightful massacres which followed. The lurid and exaggerated accounts of the atrocities in the Daily News had a tremendous impact on the readers of the paper.

Disraeli's reaction was typical. He was reluctant to believe anything which might force him to alter the policy he had decided upon and dismissed the reports as being "to a great extent, inventions."[1] It is true that this attitude was in part due to the misleading impression he was given of the atrocities by Elliot. Elliot was ill at the time and tended to accept the Turkish accounts of what had happened rather than making an independent investigation. After he was aware of the facts, Disraeli complained bitterly to Derby that it was "impossible to represent the F.O. in the House of Commons in these critical times without sufficient information. What I receive is neither ample or accurate."[2]

Despite this, Disraeli was never particularly concerned with the atrocities as a crime against humanity.[3] Atrocities were "inevitable in insurrectionary wars in such countries."[4]

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1. Disraeli to Lady Bradford, 13 Jul 1876, M & B, vi, p.43.
2. Disraeli to Derby, 14 Jul 1876, ibid, p.44.
3. 3 Hansard, 230, Cols. 1185-6, 1486-1493 (10 and 17 Jul 1876).
4. Ibid, Col.1186.

To Disraeli, the duty of the government was not to lend a receptive ear to tales of horrors perpetrated by the Turks. England's foreign policy was based, not upon sentiment, but the protection of British interests and the atrocity agitation did nothing to change his views on what these interests were.

> What our duty is at this critical moment is to maintain the Empire of England. Nor will we agree to any step, though it may obtain for a moment comparative quiet and a false prosperity that hazards the existence of the Empire.

This should not be construed as a policy of support for Turkey. "All the Turks may be in the Propontis, so far as I am concerned", Disraeli wrote to Lord Derby on 6 September 1876.[1] No doubt he would gladly have consigned the Balkan Christians to a similar fate. The crucial thing as far as Disraeli was concerned was not to lose sight of the interests of Britain and her Empire. These were protected by the maintenance of European Turkey: they had nothing to do with the welfare of the Balkan peoples.

Unfortunately for Disraeli, informed opinion in England viewed the situation rather differently. The press created a harrowing picture of a Christian people fighting a lonely battle for liberty against the infamous tyranny of the Turk. A wave of violently anti-Turkish feeling swept the country

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1. Disraeli to Derby, M & B, vi, p.53.

and an immense sympathy for the cause of Balkan nationalism was aroused. On 6 September 1876, Gladstone published his famous pamphlet, The Bulgarian Horrors in which he called for the complete expulsion of the Turks from Europe. Henceforth, Gladstone gave leadership and direction to the agitation and once again he became the leading figure of the Liberal opposition in the House of Commons. Until this time, Britain's policy in the Near East had not been a party issue. As late as 31 July 1876, Lord Hartingdon had expressed approval of the broad outlines of the government's policy in the East.[1] From now on, the Eastern Question became a burning issue between the two parties. In heated debates, coloured by their personal antipathy, Gladstone and Disraeli, now Lord Beaconsfield and directing Conservative policy from the Upper House, hardened to their own views and became less susceptible to reason.

Beaconsfield, himself, refused to believe Balkan nationalism was anything but a myth. He insisted on dismissing the insurrection in Bosnia and Herzgovina as the work of secret societies fostered by outside powers.[2] It was an outlook compounded of a complete failure to understand the independent character of Balkan nationalism and inadequate and inaccurate information. Writing to the Queen on 29 June

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1. M & B, vi, p.38.
2. For instance, Aylesbury Speech, 20 Sep 1876, Seton-Watson, p.88.

1876, Beaconsfield claimed that the reports of the British Consuls provided "incontestable" evidence that the insurgents were "simply an invasion of revolutionary bands" supported by Serbia and Montenegro, acting "on the instigation of foreign agents and foreign committees." He denied that the arch-Turcophil, Elliot, was especially anti-Russian.[1] Labouring under such poor sources of information and, it must be admitted, believing to a large extent just what it suited him to believe, Beaconsfield was able to convert the atrocity agitation into part of the Russian menace. By calling for the expulsion of the Turks from Europe, the "enlightened public" had "fallen into the Russian trap."[2] The activities of Gladstone, he considered almost treasonable and felt he was manipulating public opinion for "sinister ends."[3]

Beaconsfield was to remain convinced that, had it not been for the atrocity agitation, a satisfactory settlement could have been reached in August 1876.[4] By arousing public support for a policy which, in Beaconsfield's eyes, completely disregarded the welfare of Britain and her Empire, the leaders of the agitation had encouraged the Russians to believe that Britain would not come to the support of

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, M & B, vi, p.35.
2. Beaconsfield to Lady Chesterfield, 31 Aug 1876, Zetland, ii, p.69.
3. Aylesbury Speech, 20 Sep 1876, M & B, vi, p.65.
4. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 24 Sep 1876, Zetland, ii,p.75.

Turkey if she was attacked. While Beaconsfield was head of the British government, the interests of the Empire would never be sacrificed. Thus, Gladstone's policy could lead to war. In fact, the agitation did lead Ignatyev to this conclusion but Alexander and Gortchakoff both feared still that a Russian attack on Turkey would lead to Britain coming to some sort of agreement with Austria, thus recreating the Crimean situation. Nevertheless, the activities of the Panslavists and the sympathy of the Russians for their Serbian brethren were pushing the Tsar towards a more warlike outlook.

At this crucial point, Beaconsfield was forced by the agitation to amend his policy. He could not ignore the feeling aroused for he was aware that the country, for the time being, would not support a war against Russia, apparently on behalf of Turkey. He was hopeful that the agitation would blow itself out fairly rapidly[1] but in the meantime "we are obliged to work from a new point of departure and dictate to Turkey, who has forfeited all sympathy..."[2] Elliot was instructed to inform Turkey that Britain would have great difficulty in coming to her aid if she was attacked by Russia.[3] In a letter to Derby on 4 September 1876, Beaconsfield mooted the idea of a "solution" of the Eastern Question

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 10 Sep 1876, Letters, ii, pp.476-7.
2. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 3 Sep 1876, M & B, vi, pp.51-2.
3. Derby to Elliot, 22 Aug and 5 Sep 1876, Seton-Watson, p.62.

which he felt had to be achieved if Russia and Austria were not to go to war against Turkey in the spring. He was vague about the details of the solution, his main point being that England should take the lead in whatever settlement was achieved. Only with regard to Constantinople did Beaconsfield put forward a definite plan of action. "Constantinople with an adequate district should be neutralised and made a free port in the custody and under the guardianship of England as the Ionian Isles were."[1] If his method had changed, the basic aim of Beaconsfield's policy had not. The "key to India" must be secured. A week later, Derby put the government's point of view more clearly when speaking to a deputation of working men. He pointed out that in the government's eyes the territorial integrity of Turkey meant, at bottom, the possession of Constantinople. "No Great Power would be willing to see it in the hands of any other Great Power. No small Power could hold it at all."[2] Thus Turkey must be left in possession of the city if British interests were to be safeguarded.

The independence of Constantinople would, however, be jeopardized if Turkey lost her foothold in Europe for this would leave the city exposed to any threat from the west and Beaconsfield was well aware of this. By the end of September

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1. M & B, vi, p.52.
2. Speech at the Foreign Office, 11 Sep 1876, ibid, p.63.

the atrocity agitation was beginning to falter and Beaconsfield was increasingly convinced that "this outcry is all froth, except where it is faction."[1] As a result, he was encouraged to take up a rather stronger position regarding European Turkey. During 15-25 September 1876 a ceasefire was called between Turkey and the already badly beaten Serbs. Russia proposed a settlement involving the military occupation of Bulgaria by Russia, and Bosnia by Austria, together with a demonstration by the united Fleets in the Bosphorous. Beaconsfield refused to countenance the suggestion. The occupation of Bulgaria, "the very heart and most precious portion of European Turkey, with Constantinople almost in sight of the contemplated frontier" was looked on by England's Prime Minister as a "real Bulgarian atrocity."[2]

Nonetheless, Beaconsfield knew that a peaceful settlement had to be reached before spring if Russia was not to intervene. This he was determined to achieve by any means save sacrificing what he considered to be the securities of the Indian Empire. On 17 October 1876, Beaconsfield suggested to Derby the possibility of an alliance with Germany to maintain the status quo generally; "this would make us easy about Constantinople."[3] This idea was to be brought to

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 22 Sep 1876, M & B, vi, p.68.
2. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 5 Oct 1876, ibid, p.79.
3. Beaconsfield to Derby, 17 Oct 1876, ibid, p.81.

successful fruition at the Congress of Berlin nearly two years later but, as yet, Bismarck was not prepared to take any step which might weaken his bond with Russia.

Now, Beaconsfield placed his hopes upon a Congress of the powers. As early as the end of May 1876 he had decided that this would be the "only practical solution in the long run" and envisaged Germany and Britain acting together to secure a settlement on the basis of the status quo.[1] On 31 October 1876, Turkey was forced to accept an armistice with Serbia after Russia had threatened to sever diplomatic relations. On 4 November 1876, Derby suggested in a circular to the powers, the calling of a conference at Constantinople to elaborate yet another scheme of reform for the Ottoman Empire and to this they agreed.

Unfortunately, the omens from the outset pointed to the failure rather than the success of the Conference. The Porte only accepted the idea after Derby made it clear that the alternative was a Russo-Turkish war in which it was unlikely that Britain would support Turkey. Austria also demonstrated a marked lack of enthusiasm. Russia had begun a partial mobilisation of her troops on 15 October 1876 and in a speech on 11 November, the Tsar stated that Russia would act independently if the powers failed to agree at Constantinople

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 31 May 1876, M & B, vi, p.30.

and to secure guarantees that the necessary reforms would be carried out. The speech was followed by the mobilisation of additional troops.

Not unnaturally, therefore, Beaconsfield was determined that Britain must prepare for war while she strove for peace. As always, he was suspicious of the Russians rather than the Turks. He was sure the Russian ultimatum over the armistice had been designed as a pretext for war, and foresaw "endless chicanery on the part of Russia."[1] In this case, it would not be wise for Britain to rely simply upon negotiations to secure her interests. "Nothing can secure the success of the Conference but firmness on our side and we cannot be firm unless we are prepared for the future." Nothing would be gained with Russia "by conciliation or concession."[2] Only if Britain made it clear that, in the last resort, she was prepared to fight for her interests in the East, was Russia likely to be deterred from war. Speaking at Guildhall, Beaconsfield put this view very clearly. There was, he claimed, no country so desirous of peace as England. Her only interest was the maintenance of the status quo in order that she might continue "to enjoy that unexampled Empire which she has built up." On the other hand, her resources were "inexhaustible" should she be forced to fight for "her liberty, her

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 3 Nov 1876, M & B, vi, pp.87-8.
2. Beaconsfield to Derby, 4 Nov 1876, ibid.

independence or her empire."[1] Beaconsfield believed that the Crimean War could have been avoided if Britain had shown a similar firmness in 1853 and 1854. Whatever happened he was determined not to become another Aberdeen.

Nor should British resolution be merely a matter of words. "It is wise to assume that there will be an invasion of Turkey by Russia", he wrote to Salisbury.[2] Accordingly, Beaconsfield pushed forward preparations for the defence of the Empire. Hardy, the War Secretary, was asked to make enquiries as to the practicability of sending a British force with the Porte's consent, to hold and defend Constantinople, and a team of engineers was despatched to Constantinople to investigate the necessities of the defence of the city and the two straits in the event of war. At the same time, Beaconsfield was considering buying a port on the Black Sea from Turkey to prevent the Black Sea being a constant threat to British maritime power in the Mediterranean in the future.[3] The preparations were uphill work, for it proved very difficult to persuade Derby to contemplate the possibility of military action. Opposition from other Cabinet members was also growing now with both Salisbury and

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1. Speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet, 9 Nov 1876, M & B, vi, p.92.
2. 29 Nov 1876, ibid, p.103.
3. Memorandum by Gathorne Hardy, late Nov 1876, ibid, p.102.

Carnavon expressing concern at the direction of Beaconsfield's policy. Beaconsfield was adamant however. A show of strength provided Britain's best hope of securing peace and if war did come, Britain would be ready to guard her interests.

Unhappily, Beaconsfield's hopes for a peaceful settlement were dashed by the complete failure of the Conference of Constantinople. Lord Salisbury was despatched with careful instructions which Beaconsfield felt left no doubt "that his principal object in being sent to Constantinople is to keep the Russians out of Turkey, not to create an ideal existence for Turkish Christians."[1] In fact, it was Turkish "chicanery" not Russian, that confronted Salisbury. The European powers had surprisingly little difficulty in coming to the basis of an agreement. This was quite possibly due to Russia, represented at Constantinople by Ignatyev, realizing that Turkey would obstruct the settlement. In this case, Russia having agreed with the other powers, could claim to be acting for them when and if she intervened in Turkey.

Turkey refused to adopt a reasonable outlook. Furious opposition to all European interference had been aroused to a dangerous war feeling within the country. Midhat Pasha, the Grand Vizier, proclaimed a new Liberal Constitution on the day the Conference opened, and henceforth claimed the

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 28 Dec 1876, M & B, vi, p.111.

Conference's work was irrelevant and represented a completely unjustifiable meddling in Turkey's affairs. Salisbury was in favour of coercing the Turks, but Beaconsfield refused to entertain this idea. "Every means of friendly influence and persuasion" should be used on the Porte, but Britain would not sanction the use of force.[1] Whatever Beaconsfield thought of the Turkish attitude, he was not going to support a policy which could lead to the Russian occupation of Constantinople. There is no doubt that this attitude, coupled with the sympathetic utterances of Elliot and the activities of British engineers at Constantinople, did encourage the Porte to hope for British support. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to blame Beaconsfield for the failure of the Conference as Seton-Watson does.[2] By this stage, feelings were too high on both sides for Turkey and Russia to settle their differences amicably.

Thus, if 1875 had ended in triumph for Beaconsfield, with the Suez Canal coup, 1876 closed in gloom and disappointment. Over a year after it had reopened, a lasting solution to the Eastern Question appeared further away than ever. War now appeared imminent between Russia and Turkey, and to Beaconsfield the threat to the Empire was greater than ever

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1. Notes for Cabinet, 22 Dec 1876, M & B, vi, p.108.
2. Seton-Watson, p.135.

before. Britain now faced the prospect of having to secure the "key to India" and she faced this without the support of another European power. Beaconsfield's search for an ally had been persistent but fruitless.

The situation at home was no less discouraging. A powerful current of feeling against the policy of the government had spread through the country following the Bulgarian Atrocities. As a result, at a time when Beaconsfield considered it essential that Britain appear united in a firm resolve to support her interests in the East, his foreign policy was still being hotly criticized. He felt people were allowing sentiment to blind them to the welfare of the Empire. Even worse, divisions had begun to appear within the Cabinet itself. Derby was proving more and more opposed to positive action. Salisbury and Carnavon were increasingly disquieted by the direction of Beaconsfield's policy and were unable to agree that Russia did pose a threat to the Empire. On top of everything, Beaconsfield was suffering a prolonged period of ill health. On 20 June 1876 he had written to Lady Chesterfield, "la haute politique is refreshing; worth living for."[1] On 3 January 1877 he wrote in a very different tone, "I wish they were all - Russians and Turks - at the bottom of the Black Sea."[2]

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1. Zetland, ii, p.54.
2. Ibid, p.101.

CHAPTER IV: THE EASTERN QUESTION PART II.

Following the failure of the Constantinople Conference it appeared almost certain that Russia and Turkey would go to war in the spring of 1877. In the meantime, both Turkey and Russia were still concerned to convince the world of their good faith and moderation. The Sultan of Turkey affected to put the new, liberal constitution into operation but as he had dismissed and degraded Midhat Pasha, the author of that constitution, and appointed a reactionary as Grand Vizier, outside observers had little faith in his sincerity. Tsar Alexander continued to profess a desire to work in accord with the rest of Europe and inquired through Gortchakoff the intentions of the other powers now the Porte had refused their wishes. He wished to have this information "before deciding on the course which he may think it right to follow."[1]

To Beaconsfield, it seemed Britain had a choice between two policies. She must choose between "the Imperial policy of England, and the policy of crusade," he told the Cabinet. Beaconsfield himself was in no doubt as to what the wisest choice would be for he did not believe that Britain could safeguard the interests and welfare of its people by a policy

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1. M & B, vi, p.125.

of "sentimental eccentricity".[1] Speaking in the House of Lords on 20 February 1877, he claimed that there was "a deeper sentiment on the part of the people of this country" than "the humanitarian and philanthropic considerations involved in the Eastern Question." This sentiment was "the determination to maintain the Empire of England."[2]

In the past, Beaconsfield had believed the Empire to be best maintained by the preservation of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire and this was the policy Britain had pursued at the Conference of Constaninople. However, the Turkish refusal to accept the reforms agreed upon by the powers at the Conference had left Britain "as free as air"[3] to adopt a new policy. Moreover, Beaconsfield was well aware that some change would have to be made for the anti-Turkish feeling in the country simply would not permit the British government to wage a war against Russia on behalf of Turkey.

On 9 February 1877, Beaconsfield wrote to Derby reviewing the prospects for the future. He was still hopeful that a peaceful settlement was possible for he interpreted the readiness of the Russians to come to an agreement at Constantinople as a sign of weakness. Sure that Russia

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 23 Mar 1877, Letters, ii, p.525.
2. M & B, vi, p122.
3. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 29 (?) January 1877, ibid, p.117.

felt a war with Turkey would be "materially disastrous" to her, Beaconsfield claimed that Russia would be only too glad to extricate herself peacefully. Beaconsfield saw Bismarck as the real danger to peace, suspecting that he was deliberately trying to manoeuvre Russia into war.[1] In actual fact, Bismarck's sole interest in the Eastern Question was that it should be solved as quickly as possible in order to avoid a quarrel springing up between Austria and Russia which might force Germany to choose between her two allies. Nonetheless, it was these suspicions which led Beaconsfield to approach Shuvalov towards the end of February 1877. He assured him of Britain's good will towards Russia and agreed that the days of the Ottoman Empire were numbered but asked the Russians to give the Turks a little more time to implement the reforms. The collapse of the Porte would, he said, lead to a general European war and the Ottoman Empire should not be forced to fall at this time.[2]

Beaconsfield's overture encouraged the Tsar and Gortchakoff to send General Ignatyev to the west on a special mission. He toured Berlin, Paris, Vienna and London in March and in each proposed that the powers should act together to force the Turks to demobilize and to supervise the execution of a programme of reforms in European Turkey. Beaconsfield greeted

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 9 Feb 1877, M & B, vi, p.126.
2. Seton-Watson, p.159.

Ignatyev's arrival in London with considerable alarm.[1] To British opinion, Ignatyev personified the militaristic Pan-slav outlook which conflicted with British policy in the Near East. Despite this, the Cabinet approved a modified version of Ignatyev's circular, the London Protocol, but insisted that the agreement would be null and void if Russia did not disarm at the same time as Turkey. In Seton-Watson's opinion, Beaconsfield was only brought to consider the Protocol acceptable by a forcible warning from Salisbury of the dangers of Britain being left isolated if he refused to do so.[2] Beaconsfield's chief objection to the agreement, however, was that it was just too good to be true. At the end of March he wrote to Lady Chesterfield:

> I think affairs look well and should be more certain did they not seem incredible. In fact Russia has surrendered at discretion and England has completely triumphed in her main object: prevented the invasion of Turkey.[3]

In a letter to Salisbury he admitted that he could not understand the "triumph" of Britain and the "humiliation" of Russia.[4]

Beaconsfield did not have long to muse upon England's good fortune. On 9 April 1877 Turkey formally rejected the Protocol and on 24 April the Tsar declared war on Turkey. If

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1. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 16 Mar 1877, Zetland, ii, p.108.
2. Seton-Watson, p.163; Salisbury to Beaconsfield, 12 Mar 1877, Cecil, ii, p.131.
3. Beaconsfield to Lady Chesterfield, 31 Mar 1877, Zetland, ii, p.111.
4. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 1 Apr 1877, M & B, vi, p.131.

the outbreak of war came as a disappointment to Beaconsfield, it certainly did not come as a surprise. Since the failure of the Conference he had been considering how Britain's interests could be best secured in the event of this war. Beaconsfield possessed no illusions as to the military strength of Turkey and felt at this stage that war would probably lead to partition. "In that case" he told Derby, "we must have a decided course and seize at the fitting time, what is necessary for the security of our Empire."[1] The change in Beaconsfield's policy from supporting the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire to entertaining schemes of partition is more apparent than real. To declare the maintenance of the Porte a vital British interest would lead Britain into a war with Russia which even Beaconsfield's own Cabinet would not support. Thus, he had no alternative but to accept that partition might be inevitable. For a period immediately following the Bulgarian Atrocities, he had been forced to adopt a similar standpoint. But then as now, the basic purpose of Beaconsfield's Eastern policy had remained unaltered: the safeguarding of Britain's connection with her Empire through Suez and the Middle East. Nor had he changed in his belief that the security of this connection depended on the independence of Constantinople and the freedom

1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 9 Feb 1877, M & B, vi, p.126.

of the Straits from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean.

Following the Turkish refusal of the London Protocol, Beaconsfield felt the Cabinet must agree on their "decided course" without delay. On 21 April 1877 he proposed to the Cabinet that Britain should occupy the Dardanelles "as a material guarantee against Russia seizing Constantinople." Britain would retire from the Dardanelles when a treaty of peace was concluded "which would secure the requisite balance of power."[1] Beaconsfield did not view this as an unduly aggressive policy. He was convinced not only that Britain must assume a "commanding position" if her interests were to be secure, but also that firmness on the part of Britain was more likely to deter Russia from steps which might lead to war with Britain than Derby's policy of non-involvement. Seven of the Cabinet, including Derby, Salisbury and Carnavon, remained opposed to any military committment on the part of Britain[2] and Beaconsfield could not persuade them otherwise.

At the very least, Beaconsfield considered it imperative that Russia should be made aware of just what Britain conceived her interests in the Eastern Question to be. He wished the Cabinet to warn Russia that the occupation of Constantinople, an attack on Egypt or the obstruction of the

1. Secret Memorandum, 23 Apr 1877, Letters, ii, p.530.
2. Memorandum of Sir Stafford Northcote, M & B, vi, p.139.

Dardanelles would constitute a casus belli for Britain. On 6 May 1877, Derby despatched a Note to Russia warning her that British neutrality was conditional on these interests not being threatened. To Beaconsfield, this was to remain "the charter of our policy with regard to the Eastern Question,"[1] and he did not intend the warning contained in the Note to be an empty threat. The Russian response to the Note was friendly, and Gortchakoff promised that Russia would respect British interests. Russia, in the meantime however, appeared to be sweeping the Turkish opposition before her and Beaconsfield's suspicions of Russian intentions were too longstanding for him not to feel that Britain would sooner or later have to abandon her position of watchful neutrality. After all, in 1873 Russia had promised equally faithfully that she would have no intention of annexing Turkestan but had then done so.

Convinced as he was that Britain would sooner or later have to act, and act forcefully, to protect her imperial interests, Britain's isolation was continually disturbing to Beaconsfield. It was a situation he was concerned to remedy throughout 1877 and the early months of 1878 by an alliance with Austria-Hungary. His distrust of Bismarck at this stage discouraged him from continuing to seek common

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1. Speech on the resignation of Derby and Carnavon, 25 Jan 1878, Hansard [237] 446.

action by Germany and Britain in the East. In this case Austria was the only real alternative and it appeared to Beaconsfield the two nations had common interests in the Near East which could form the basis of an alliance. It was obviously in Austrian interests too, that Russian hegemony should not be established in the Balkans and that Russia should not occupy Constantinople or gain control of the Dardanelles. Unfortunately, Russia had already taken steps to protect herself from a flank attack from the Balkans. On 15 January 1877 a secret agreement had been signed by Austria and Russia delimiting their spheres of interest in the Balkans, and specifying the terms on which Austria would consent to remain neutral if Russia invaded Turkey. Because of their political rivalry, Count Andrassy did not inform the Austrian ambassador in London, Count Beust, of what had occurred. As a result, Beaconsfield knew nothing of the agreement until later in 1877 and when he was informed of it by Shuvalov,[1] was reluctant to believe the Russian, continuing his advances to Austria. If Britain was to act, she would have to do so alone.

By the middle of June the Russians' inexorable advance was still continuing and Beaconsfield was becoming more convinced than ever that Britain should take more positive

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 10 Oct 1877, M & B, vi, p.186.

action than "the paralysing neutrality in vogue"[1] to counteract the Russian menace. His growing disquiet was not without justification. At this time there was a considerable struggle in Russia between the moderate influences led by Shuvalov and Gortchakoff, and the more extreme views of the Panslavs and the military leaders, for control of Russia's foreign policy. Moderate opinion wished to end the war quickly and to create an autonomous Bulgaria which would not extend south of the Balkan mountains. They hoped Britain would remain neutral in return. An agreement along these lines with provision for Austria to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina was suggested to the British government by Gortchakoff on 31 May 1877. However, the proposal was withdrawn within a few days and on 14 June 1877 it was announced that the new Bulgaria must extend south as well as north of the Balkans. From this time until April 1878, the Panslavists, represented by General Ignatyev and the military commanders, were able to give the Tsar's policy much greater aggressiveness than it had previously possessed.

To Beaconsfield, the withdrawal of Gortchakoff's offer confirmed all his worst suspicions of Russia. He had already suggested to Layard on 6 June 1877 that the Sultan might be persuaded to invite the British fleet to Constantinople and allow a military occupation of Gallipoli by Britain. This

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1. Beaconsfield to Layard, 6 Jun 1877, M & B, vi, p.142.

would provide the "material guarantee" which Beaconsfield had always wanted, to ensure the maintenance of the status quo with regard to Constantinople and the Straits, and Britain would be able to ensure her interests were safeguarded when peace was negotiated.[1] On 13 June 1877 Derby, at the behest of his colleagues, proposed an "active alliance" to Count Beust. Nothing substantial came of Beaconsfield's attempt to persuade the Cabinet to adopt a firmer tone. The whole Cabinet, with the exception of Lord John Manners, opposed the Gallipoli expedition,[2] forcing Beaconsfield to abandon the idea, and the Austrian reply to Derby's overture was very non-committal. The progress of war during June did strengthen Beaconsfield's hand against his dissentient colleagues to a certain extent. Early in July 1877 the Russians gained control of two of the passes through the Balkans and it began to appear likely that the Russians might reach Constantinople. The Cabinet did agree to despatch a further Note warning Russia of the serious consequences which could follow the occupation of Constantinople.

However, this decision fell far short of what Beaconsfield desired and he was increasingly frustrated by the opposition he faced within his Cabinet. It did not seem to

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1. Beaconsfield to Layard, 6 Jun 1877, M & B, vi, p.142.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 16 Jul 1877, ibid, pp.151-2.

him that the policy he had advocated was unnecessarily warlike. Explaining his policy to the Queen on 16 July 1877, Beaconsfield pointed out that he had avoided advising the occupation[1] of Constantinople itself because such a step must involve Britain in a war with Russia. He had advocated instead the occupation of the Dardanelles which he felt would provide sufficient assurance that Britain could achieve the restoration of Constantinople at the end of the war if it was occupied by the Russians. But some positive action was vital if Britain wished to maintain "her present position in the Meditteranean."[2] As far as Beaconsfield was concerned, this was a vital imperial interest and must be secured whatever the cost. He did not think that a British expedition to the Straits would lead to war. Rather, he felt it would provide the best chance of a peaceful settlement. On the other hand, if war was necessary for the security of the Empire, Britain must be prepared to make the sacrifice of fighting for her possessions.

> Lord Beaconsfield hopes that the great objects of your Majesty's imperial policy may be secured without going to war; but if war is necessary he will not shrink from advising Your Majesty to declare it.[3]

On 21 July 1877, Beaconsfield persuaded the Cabinet

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1. Beaconsfield speaks often of the "occupation" of the peninsula, but it does not appear that he meant anything more than the presence of troops.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 16 Jul 1877, M & B, vi, pp.151-2.
3. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 29 Jul 1877, ibid, p.158.

Britain should declare war on Russia if Russia occupied Constantinople and did not arrange to retire from it in the immediate future. In fighting such a war, Beaconsfield believed, Britain would be fighting in defence of her Indian Empire and he dreamed of the Empire contributing to its own defence. If war should be declared, he told the Queen the day after the Cabinet decision, "the Empress of India should order her armies to clear Central Asia of the Muscovites and drive them into the Caspian; we have a good instrument for this purpose in Lord Lytton and indeed he was placed there with that in view."[1] Such a campaign was completely impractical considering the terrain and distances involved. Beaconsfield's suggestion of it suggests there was more than a little justification behind Salisbury's complaint that Beaconsfield often misread the situation by relying on maps of too small a scale.[2] Other rather grandiose plans of campaign appear in Beaconsfield's writings at this time. For example, he suggested to the Cabinet on 15 August 1877 that it would be possible for a British army to be landed at Batoum, march "without difficulty" through Armenia and threaten the Asiatic possessions of Russia severely enough to force her to a settlement.[3] Plans such as these illustrate very

1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 22 Jun 1877, M & B, vi, p.155.
2. 11 Jun 1877, Hansard, cited by Cecil, ii, p.155.
3. Note in Cabinet, 15 Aug 1877, M & B, vi, p.172. See also letter to Derby, 1 Sep 1877, ibid, pp.177-8, "an English army, 40,000 men with the Black Sea and Batoum at our command, could march to Tiflis."

clearly how a lack of geographical knowledge and a rather extravagant imagination could lead Beaconsfield into serious errors. On the other hand, they also illustrate Beaconsfield's conception of British policy in the Near East as part of a great imperial defence of the Indian Empire from a Russian menace which he believed had been growing for thirty years.

At the end of July 1877 the successful Russian advance was checked at the city of Plevna, a great centre of roads on the right flank of their advance. The city did not fall until 9 December 1877 and, although the Russian advance in Asia was continuing, the immediate threat to Constantinople faded. Beaconsfield, encouraged by this show of strength by Turkey, was optimistic that Russia would be unable to achieve her aims before winter put an end to effective campaigning. It now seemed possible that hostilities might be halted before British interests were threatened. At a Cabinet meeting held on 15 August 1877 to discuss the Eastern Question, Beaconsfield suggested that Britain should be ready to take steps to prevent a second campaign by Russia.[1] At this point, Colonel Frederick Wellesley, the British military attaché in Russia arrived in England. He brought personal assurances from the Tsar that Russia would only attack Constantinople if events forced her to do so and that British interests in

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1. Note on Cabinet, 15 Aug 1877, M & B, vi, pp.171-2.

Constantinople, Egypt, the Suez Canal and India would be respected. Beaconsfield seized the opportunity to convey a personal statement of his own Eastern policy to the Tsar.

The content of the memorandum Wellesley took back to Russia was plainly threatening. It was designed to convince Russia that Beaconsfield, while desirous of peace, was equally determined "to uphold the honour and defend the interests of England."[1] A second campaign by Russia would involve Britain as a belligerent, stated Beaconsfield. He then denied that this policy was not wholeheartedly supported by the Cabinet. This was quite untrue. Beaconsfield was going behind Derby's back in sending the memorandum, and Derby as well as Salisbury, Carnavon and Northcote would certainly have disapproved of its content. Beaconsfield doubtless considered that if the memorandum was to have the desired effect as a deterrent, Russia must be left in no doubt of British solidarity. Actually, it appears to have been a miscalculation on Beaconsfield's part. Instead of deterring the Tsar from any further advances, it made him determined to push hostilities forward so that Russia would not need a second campaign.

Turkey's display of unexpected vitality at Plevna also encouraged Beaconsfield to hope Turkey might yet be maintained as a European power.[2] He had never wavered in his belief

1. Memorandum by Col. Wellesley, 17 Aug 1877, M & B, vi, pp. 174-5.
2. Beaconsfield to Lady Chesterfield, 8 Sep 1877, Zetland, ii, p.134.

that the preservation of the Ottoman Empire provided the best assurance of peace for Europe and the best security for the Indian Empire. The apparent weakness of Turkish government and the unpopularity of this traditional Palmerstonian outlook had made the policy impractical earlier in the year. From now on, while still recognising it as a possibility, Beaconsfield was opposed to the "dark game of partition."[1]

On 5 October 1877, Beaconsfield proposed to the Cabinet that Britain offer to mediate between Turkey and Russia, making it clear to Russia Britain was prepared to ally with the Porte should Constantinople be threatened. The Cabinet was "indisposed" to mix the offer of mediation with anything like a threat but they did favour the idea of obtaining a secret agreement from Russia at the close of the campaign that she would not occupy Constantinople. At the same time, Britain would offer her services as a mediator.[2] By the beginning of November, Beaconsfield was becoming convinced that a Note demanding a secret but written agreement should be concluded immediately. Although the Turks still held Plevna, Russia was advancing rapidly in Asia Minor and the situation was becoming more threatening to the imperial interests of Constantinople and the Dardanelles. If Russia

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1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 13 Sep 1877, M & B, vi, p.178.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 5 Oct 1877, ibid, p.183.

should refuse the agreement, Beaconsfield contemplated war. He warned the Queen that she must prepare to use "all the means in your Majesty's Power...to guard your Majesty's Empire from such a result", that is, from the occupation of either Constantinople or the Dardanelles by the Russians.[1] As yet, Beaconsfield dared not broach the subject of war to the Cabinet for he knew that while Turkey held Plevna, the Cabinet would not agree that the threat to Constantinople and the Straits was immediate enough to warrant military action by Britain.

Although the Cabinet agreed to send the Note, it was decided not to send it at once. Rumours had reached Britain of possible Russian peace terms regarding Bulgaria, which were "ambiguous and dangerous". It was felt that, as the British Note referred only to Constantinople and the Dardanelles, Russia might take it to mean that British approval of the settlement proposed for Bulgaria would be forthcoming. It was agreed to delay sending the Note until circumstances should require it.[2] Beaconsfield was quite agreeable to this. Britain had defined her interests in Derby's Note of 6 May 1877 and these were the only British interests Beaconsfield was prepared to go to war for. On the other hand, the situation

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 16 Nov 1877, M & B, vi, p.198.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 14 Nov 1877, Letters, ii, p.574.

in Bulgaria clearly affected the security of Constantinople and therefore Britain must attempt to secure a favourable settlement there.

By 4 December 1877 Beaconsfield was again pressing Derby to send the Note at once and to word it as strongly as possible. He was afraid that Russia would be encouraged to continue the war if Britain continued to hold back. Beaconsfield was more convinced than ever that Russia was ready for peace[1] and that decisive action by Britain could lead to a peaceful settlement safeguarding British interests.

On 9 December 1877 Plevna fell and the way to Constantinople, "the key to India", was open to the Russians. Beaconsfield was determined Britain must act at once to secure her interests. At a Cabinet meeting called on 14 December he proposed that Parliament should be summoned immediately to vote a considerable increase in Britain's armed forces and that Britain should immediately commence negotiations as a mediator between the belligerents. When Salisbury, Carnavon and, of course, Derby, proved reluctant to agree, he forced their acquiescence by threatening to resign. The date for the meeting of Parliament was set at 17 January 1878 and Beaconsfield looked forward expectantly to a vote of Credit which would permit "an army of occupation"

1. Beaconsfield to Derby, 5 Dec 1877, M & B, vi, p.199.

to go to Turkey.[1]

The situation continued to grow more critical through December. Turkey proved glad to accept British mediation but the victorious Russians refused to limit the right of action of their troops until an armistice had been concluded. To make matters worse, Beaconsfield still faced dissension within his Cabinet. Derby was actually leaking information of Cabinet proceedings to Shuvalov[2] and Salisbury and Carnavon remained adamantly opposed to any steps which might lead to war with Russia. As Beaconsfield still hoped that a firm front by Britain might deter Russia from threatening British interests, this disagreement, faithfully reported to Shuvalov by Derby, was especially distressing.[3] Divisions within the Cabinet continued to trouble him until March 1878.

However, Beaconsfield was now resolute that Britain must make a stand. The threat to Constantinople and the Straits appeared too real to him to permit any further procrastination. The Queen's speech on the opening of Parliament on 17 January 1878 contained a clear warning to Russia that although the conditions on which British neutrality was based had not yet been infringed, if hostil-

1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 29 Dec 1877, Letters, ii, p.582.
2. Seton-Watson, p.250; Blake, pp.627-8, 634-8.
3. For instance, Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 25 Dec 1877, M & B, vi, p.210.

ities continued, it might be necessary to adopt measures of precaution.[1] Speaking in the debate on the Address, Beaconsfield appealed to the House of Commons to be liberal in providing the means "to vindicate the honour of the realm and to preserve and maintain the interests of the Empire."[2]

At the same time, Beaconsfield again approached Austria with the suggestion that they draw up an identical Note which would amount to a declaration that the Russian seizure of either Constantinople or the Straits constituted a casus belli to both countries. Even at this stage, he appears to have been uncertain as to whether there was a secret Austrian-Russian agreement.[3] Austria was indeed becoming alarmed at the extent of Russian progress, but as yet Andrassy preferred not to ally himself definitely with the British.

But with or without allies, Beaconsfield was determined that Britain must act. On 23 January 1878 he persuaded the Cabinet to send the Fleet up to Constantinople, even though he knew the decision would result in the resignation of Derby and Carnavon. On 24 January, Layard telegraphed that Turkey and Russia had agreed on the bases of peace and the last of them made the question of control of the Straits a matter to be settled between "the Congress and the Emperor

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1. M & B, vi, p.224.
2. Ibid.
3. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 19 Jan 1878, Letters, ii, p.596.

of Russia." This appeared to remove the justification for sending the Fleet and it was withdrawn. Derby returned to the Cabinet. Unfortunately, Layard was mistaken and the Tsar had, in fact, stated agreement over the Straits was to be between the Sultan and himself. Well aware British policy was already indecisive in appearance to the other powers, the Cabinet felt it would cost too much in dignity to send the Fleet back into the Straits. Nevertheless, Beaconsfield was aware the threat to Constantinople had not abated.

It cannot be over-emphasised that even now Beaconsfield was not proposing to go to war with Russia in support of Turkey. If force was to be used by Britain, it would be used to defend interests that were peculiarly British; interests essential to the security of the Empire. Contemporaries had criticized Beaconsfield's policy as selfish: he preferred to describe it as patriotic.[1] With realism that often bordered on cynicism, Beaconsfield saw altruism as something completely out of context in international politics. International politics were decided by the use of power and the object of every nation's foreign policy must be to conserve the keystones of its own strength. For Britain, Turkish Constantinople was such a key. The Fleet did not enter the Straits as a sign of support for Turkey. "The

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1. Speech at Guildhall, 9 Nov 1877, M & B, vi, pp.192-3.

intention of sending the fleet in that direction was that it should defend the lives and properties of British subjects in Constantinople and take care of British interests in the Straits."[1] To Beaconsfield, Britain's main interest in the Straits was to prevent Russia gaining an outlet into the Mediterranean and thus putting Russia in a position where she would conceivable threaten British communications through the Mediterranean to Suez.

Following protests by both Austria and Britain, Gortchakoff promised in a circular on 25 January that those aspects of the peace settlement which were of European interest should be decided only with the agreement of the great powers. Also, on 27 January 1878, Russia had concluded an armistice with Turkey. Despite this, rumours continued to reach Beaconsfield that the Russian troops were preparing to occupy the Turkish capital.[2] As a result, Beaconsfield despatched the Fleet through the Dardanelles to the sea of Marmara and hurried along the preparations for a military expedition should it be needed. In actual fact, these actions only served to convince Russia that Britain had determined on war and the Tsar prepared to enter Constantinople. Fortunately, the Grand Duke Nicholas, in charge of

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1. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 7 Feb 1878, Zetland, ii, p.159.
2. Sumner, pp.374-5.

the Russian army hesitated to give the necessary orders and war was averted. For the second and third weeks of February 1878, however, Russia and Britain were hanging on the very brink of war and it was some ten weeks before the danger of hostilities commencing passed.

Sure that his actions had been the correct ones, Beaconsfield was not unhappy with the situation. In particular, he felt opinion in Britain was swinging rapidly against the Russians and in favour of his imperial policy. The Cabinet, with the exception of Derby, exhibited a growing solidarity and Beaconsfield wrote hopefully to the Queen: "the country is stirring at last; if we only had a corps d'armee at Gallipoli, the Crowns of Great Britain and India would not be unworthy of the imperial brow which they adorn."[1] His optimism at this time was probably due to his belief that Austria was now prepared to lend considerable aid should war be declared.[2]

In February 1878, Beaconsfield's mind was filled with schemes to ensure that Britain would be able to provide adequate protection for the route to the East. He entertained the attractive idea of "a league of the Meditteranean Powers to secure the independence of that sea"[3] but the scheme was nullified at the outset by Derby's refusal to join such a

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 9 Feb 1878, M & B, vi, p.244.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 16 Feb 1878, ibid, p.248.
3. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 2 Mar 1878, ibid, p.254.

league. Beaconsfield was also considering the acquisition of a base in the eastern Mediterranean. It was an idea he had been entertaining since before the Conference of Constantinople[1] and he was sure the acquisition of "some territorial station conducive to British interests"[2] would improve the security of the Empire. A position such as Mytilene, St. Jean d'Arc or a post in the Persian Gulf would give Britain "a strong chain of communication with India" and lessen the chances of the Russian conditions of peace endangering that connection, Beaconsfield told the Cabinet.[3] The matter was referred to a committee and later re-emerged with the acquisition of Cyprus. There was no question of it being abandoned, for the settlement between Russia and Turkey fulfilled all Beaconsfield's worst expectations.

Although it was signed on 3 March, the details of the Treaty of San Stefano were not known by the British government until 23 March 1878. When the news did come, it was bad. The two conditions which most concerned the British were the creation of a huge Bulgaria stretching from the shores of the Black Sea to the Aegean and the cession to Russia of all the eastern portion of Armenia and the binding of Turkey to pay an indemnity of forty-five million pounds. Beaconsfield was

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1. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 29 Nov 1876, M & B, vi, p.103.
2. Beaconsfield to Layard, 22 Nov 1877, ibid, p.251.
3. Northcote to Victoria, 2 Mar 1878, ibid, p.253.

certain the new Bulgaria would be completely under Russian domination and afford her both a foothold on the Mediterranean and an ideal position from which to threaten Constantinople. The cession of territory in Asia and the indemnity would mean the remainder of Turkey would be "reduced to a state of absolute subjugation to Russia" which would mean Russia having control, indirectly but effectively, of the outlet of the Black Sea.[1] Early in January, when it was understood that Russia and Turkey were negotiating, Britain had demanded that anything affecting the Treaties of 1856 and 1871[2] must be approved by a conference of all the powers taking part in those Treaties. Andrassy then proposed the conference be held in Vienna and magnified into a congress of the powers. From the time he learnt the details of San Stefano, Beaconsfield considered it imperative that the Congress be allowed to review any articles of the settlement they felt necessary. This the Russians refused to agree to and once again it seemed the two nations were on the verge of drifting into war.

Beaconsfield, however, felt that war could be avoided. He was sure Russia did not wish to fight and would relent if she was convinced that Britain was ready to go to war.[3] "We

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1. Speech in House of Lords, 8 Apr 1878, Kebbel, ii, p.180.
2. Treaty of Paris 1856 and Treaty of London 1871.
3. Notes by Derby at the Cabinet, 27 Mar 1878, M & B, vi, p.264.

have to maintain the Empire and secure peace; I think we can do both", he wrote to Hardy. But if Britain was to avoid drifting into war she must be "bold and determined."[1] On 27 March 1878, after reminding the Cabinet that the peaceful maintenance of the Empire was still the object of British foreign policy, he proposed calling out the reserves in England and sending an expedition from India to occupy Cyprus and Scanderoon. The Cabinet, with the exception of Derby, agreed to both proposals. Derby resigned and Salisbury took his place as Foreign Secretary. Beaconsfield's policy at this stage was a determined one but, more important, it was a colourful and impressive one. Beaconsfield had always wanted Britain to act forcefully in the manner of a great imperial power. At last she was doing so and he was sure the other powers of Europe would be impressed by Britain's show of strength. The use of Indian troops, in particular, would emphasise the extra-European basis of British power. "The imagination of the Continent will be much affected by the first appearance of what they will believe to be an inexhaustible supply of men."[2] This was the value of the Indian expedition to Malta. Only 7,000 troops arrived and if war had been declared, they could not have provided a significant obstacle to the massed Russian forces which were

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1. Beaconsfield to Hardy, 27 Mar 1878, M & B, vi, p.261.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 12 Apr 1878, ibid, p.285.

accepted in London as totalling around 120,000 combatants, south of the Balkans.[1] "It will show Russia we are in earnest" Beaconsfield wrote to Lady Bradford[2] and it would also hint that Britain possessed tremendous resources to fight a war in defence of her interests.

The Russians were suitably impressed by Beaconsfield's actions. They appeared to provide tangible evidence for the contention of the moderates in the Russian Foreign Office that the Treaty of San Stefano had left Russia in a dangerously over-extended position which must either lead to war or a humiliating withdrawal. From now until the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878, the moderates as represented by Shuvalov and Gortchakoff, regained the decisive influence over Russian policy and Ignatyev, spokesman of the aggressive Panslavists, disappeared from the scene. At the same time, Salisbury both more able and more energetic than Derby, and with a realistic appreciation of the problems of imperial relationships, brought direction and a positive outlook to British diplomacy. From now on, the threat of war abated steadily. After initiating further unproductive advances to Andrassy, Salisbury began direct negotiations with the Russians. Progress was steady and on 30 May 1878 an agreement was signed. The

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1. Home to Tenterden, 10 April 1878, cited in footnote, Sumner, p.397.
2. Beaconsfield to Lady Bradford, 16 April 1878, Zetland, ii, p.183.

crucial point of the Anglo-Russian Convention, as the agreement was termed, was Russia's surrender of the big Bulgaria of San Stefano for a smaller state divided into two provinces separated by the Balkans. Only the northern provinces were to be autonomous. The southern was to have self-government under the Turks. This would make the Balkan range the frontier of the effective Turkish Empire.

Beaconsfield was satisfied that the agreement would provide adequate security for Constantinople and the Straits.[1] However, he feared the Russian conquests in Armenia endangered the route to the Indian Empire from another direction. Beaconsfield could see nothing to prevent the Russians menacing the Suez Canal by marching through Asia Minor from Armenia.[2] It was equally possible for them to penetrate south-east towards the Persian Gulf. The Tsar was not prepared to give up the territory annexed in Asia and the Convention contained only minor concessions in this respect. To meet this new threat, Beaconsfield reverted to the idea of Britain obtaining from Turkey a stronghold from which she could safeguard her interests in western Asia. His choice was the island of Cyprus. Its strategic value has since been severely criticized but it was recommended by Colonel Home, one of the

1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 21 Apr 1878, M & B, vi, p.289.
2. Speech in the House of Lords, 8 Apr 1878, Kebbel, ii, pp.173-4.

officers sent to Constantinople to examine defences and Beaconsfield was convinced it was "the key to western Asia." In return for Cyprus, Britain would enter into a defensive alliance with Turkey, guaranteeing her Asian territories from Russian invasion. Beaconsfield assured the Queen that by such an arrangement, "your Majesty's Indian Empire" would be "immensely strengthened." It would "weld together your Majesty's Indian Empire and Great Britain."[1] A simple agreement to this effect was signed with Turkey on 4 June 1878.

It is important to see both these agreements as part of the same policy. Beaconsfield was not prepared to concede the Tsar extensive gains of territory in Asia unless the security of the route to India was safeguarded by Turkey's cession of Cyprus.[2] It was not until 26 May 1878 that the Sultan agreed to the proposal and only then could Salisbury bring the negotiations with Shuvalov to a satisfactory conclusion. Only when taken together were the two agreements an adequate security for the Empire.

As a result of these negotiations, Beaconsfield and Salisbury departed for Berlin and the Congress, confident British interests were already assured. So far as Britain was concerned, the work of the Congress was largely a matter of the registration of a settlement already concluded in the

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 5 May 1878, M & B, vi, p.291.
2. The Shuvalov Memorandum, ibid, p.297.

Anglo-Russian Convention. Nonetheless, there is no doubt this was the high point of Beaconsfield's career. Although the real loser by the Treaty of Berlin was Turkey, the settlement with regard to Bulgaria cannot be seen as other than a victory for Britain and a defeat for Russia. Beaconsfield returned in triumph bringing, he claimed, "peace with honour." On 18 July 1878 he justified the policy he had pursued over the last few months to the House of Lords. His main contention was that by the Congress and the Cyprus Convention, the menace to European independence and the threatened injury to the British Empire had been averted. In Europe, although the frontiers of Turkey had been shortened, the Ottoman Empire remained as a check to Russia and an assurance the balance of power would be maintained. But while the settlement was advantageous to Europe as a whole, Beaconsfield emphasised that Britain possessed interests in the East more considerable than the other powers and peculiar to Britain. Britain's interests were "urgent and substantial and enormous." They involved the security of the Indian Empire. It was because Russian expansion in Asia Minor posed a threat to this security that Britain had signed the Cyprus Convention. The Eastern Question had always made India "a source of grave anxiety" to Britain, Beaconsfield said, and British policy had been directed at removing this anxiety. "In taking

Cyprus the movement is not Meditteranean it is Indian." It was an essential step towards "the maintenance of our Empire and its preservation in peace." The possession of Cyprus and the alliance with Turkey gave Britain "that force which it is necessary to possess often in great transactions, though you may not fortunately feel that it is necessary to have recourse to that force." In some ways, Beaconsfield conceded, his policy might have added to the responsibilities of Britain, but it was designed to ensure that Britain would never assume the "responsibility of handing to our successors a weakened or diminished Empire".[1]

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Obviously many very serious criticisms can be made of Beaconsfield's policy in the Near East, 1876-1878. The basic premises of that policy were dubious in the extreme, for it relied upon the assumption that Russian policy in the Near East posed a threat to the security of the Indian Empire by threatening Britain's route to India through the Mediterranean. In fact, there is no evidence of Russia ever contemplating placing pressure in this direction. Even if she

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1. Speech to the Lords, 18 Jul 1878, Kebbel, ii, pp.180-201.

had, it is still extremely strange that Beaconsfield should have been obsessed with the notion that Constantinople and control of the Straits was the key to the whole problem. Russia, who did not even possess a fleet on the Black Sea, was highly unlikely to have ever been able to challenge British naval supremacy in the Mediterranean. It was, moreover, just as unlikely that she would attempt to march an expedition more than 1,000 miles largely through desert to Egypt and the Suez. In this context, Beaconsfield's alarm at the possible consequences of the Russian advance into Armenia appears much more reasonable than his older concern for the safety of Constantinople.

But Beaconsfield had assumed office with the long-standing conviction that Russian expansion constituted a deliberate and growing threat to Britain's Indian Empire which Britain must counter. He certainly believed Constantinople was the "key to India". On the other hand, he did not believe that Balkan nationalism and Panslavism owed their inspiration to anything other than Russia's imperialistic ambitions. Consequently, it was easy for Beaconsfield to construe the development of the Eastern Question, culminating in war between Russia and Turkey, as justification of his longstanding suspicions of Russia.

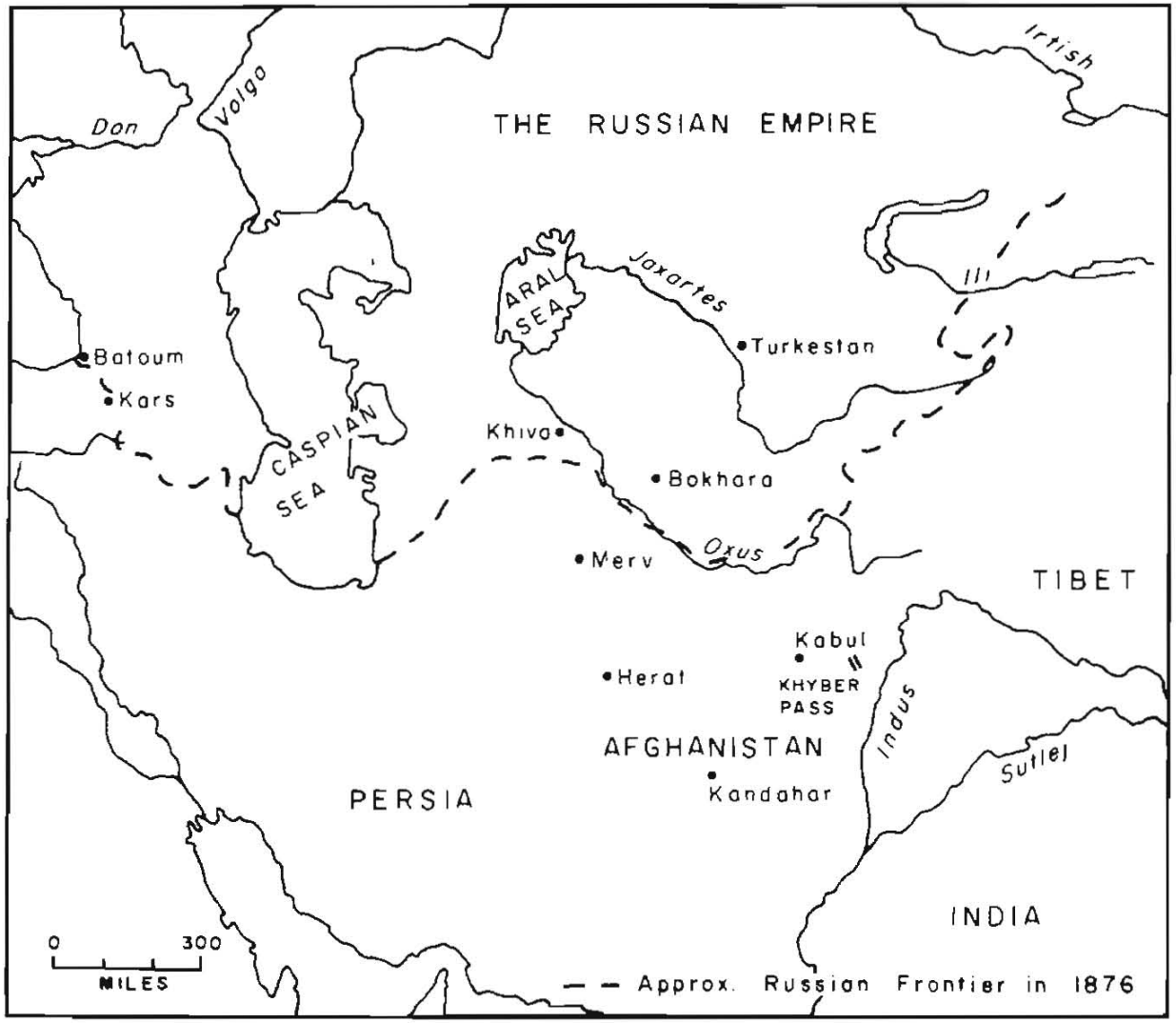
It was, therefore, vital, he believed, for Britain to

take immediate action to safeguard her interests. Unfortunately for the Prime Minister, opinion within Britain as a whole, and within his Cabinet in particular, made it impossible for him to implement the forthright policy he advocated. As a result, for the two years following the re-opening of the Eastern Question, British policy appeared vacillating and indecisive. Ironically, this was precisely the appearance Beaconsfield was sure Britain must avoid if she was to both avoid war and secure her Empire. Despite this, there is nothing to suggest that Beaconsfield's own aims in the Eastern Question altered substantially during these two years. He was consistent as to ends even if he remained flexible as to means of achieving those ends. Circumstances forced him to explore all the avenues which might keep the routes to India safe, even an alliance with Russia herself. Not until 1878, however, was Beaconsfield able to adopt the policy he had always considered both appropriate to Britain's status as a great imperial power and most likely to bring a peaceful and satisfactory settlement. Events in the first half of that year appeared to justify his contention that once Russia was convinced Britain was determined to fight rather than give way, she herself would back down.

Beaconsfield returned from the Congress of Berlin confident the security of the Empire was at last secured. It

appeared his policy had been completely successful and the threat to British communications with her Indian Empire that Beaconsfield had seen developing since 1871 had been met. In this hour of triumph it certainly did not occur to Beaconsfield to wonder whether in actual fact the threat had ever really existed.

RUSSIA IN CENTRAL ASIA



CHAPTER V: AFGHANISTAN.

The close of the first session of Parliament in 1878 saw the Earl of Beaconsfield at the height of his reknown and popularity. To Beaconsfield himself, virtually all his objectives in foreign policy appeared to have been achieved. The threat to the security of the Indian Empire that he had seen stemming from the Russian advance into the Near East had been successfully met with the Treaty of Berlin and the Cyprus Convention. The leading role Britain assumed in the settlement of the Eastern Question and her success at the Congress of Berlin had raised British influence and prestige in Europe to heights she had not enjoyed since the death of Palmerston. Moreover, the shadowy Dreikaiserbund which had threatened to dominate Europe during the first two years of Beaconsfield's ministry had disintegrated. Austria had associated herself with British policy at Berlin and Bismarck, impressed by the personality of Beaconsfield and disliking the Russian Chancellor, Gortchakoff, had also shown considerable sympathy for the British viewpoint.

Unfortunately, the glory Beaconsfield brought back from Berlin was not to last until the end of the ministry in 1880. Even in 1878 a deepening agricultural and industrial depression

at home detracted from the glamour and success of the government abroad. In the next two years, two wars, one in Afghanistan and the other in South Africa, were to cast a blight on the reputation of Conservative foreign policy. Both were easily represented by the Opposition as being the result of an over-ambitious imperial policy. Added to the growing social and economic distress of the country, they contributed decisively to the steady deterioration of Conservative popularity which ended in a heavy electoral defeat in 1880.

But in June 1878 all this lay in the future, and Beaconsfield, for the moment at least, was content to rest upon his laurels. The exertions of the Berlin Congress had placed an almost intolerable strain upon his failing health and he returned to England completely exhausted. From this time on, he was content to entrust more and more of the conduct of British diplomacy to Salisbury who had won Beaconsfield's confidence completely by the time the two had returned to England from Berlin. The foreign policies of the two men had been moving closer together since the beginning of 1878 and it seems that Salisbury had by now become infected with Beaconsfield's enthusiasm for a foreign policy based upon the maintenance of Britain's imperial character.[1]

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1. Speech at Conservative banquet in Knightsbridge, 27 Jul 1878, Cecil, ii, p.301.

However, if Beaconsfield was content to leave the day to day conduct of the Foreign Office to Salisbury, he still retained the final initiative in directing the broad outlines of British diplomacy. From the time the Eastern Question re-opened, early in 1876, until the middle of 1878 Beaconsfield's attention had been concentrated almost entirely upon events in the Near East. With the Treaty of Berlin signed, his foreign policy took on a rather wider perspective and his attention was directed first of all to the balance of power in Europe. Beaconsfield had always believed it to be essential that Britain play a dominant role in European affairs. His speech at Guildhall to the Lord Mayor's Banquet, 1879, illustrated this very clearly.

> If there be a country, for example, one of the most extensive and wealthiest empires in the world - if that country, from a perverse interpretation of its insular geographical position, turns an indifferent ear to the feelings and the fortunes of Continental Europe, such a course would, I believe, only end in its becoming an object of general plunder. So long as the power and advice of England are felt in the councils of Europe, peace, I believe, will be maintained, and for a long period. Without their presence war...seems to me inevitable.

Englishmen must not be ashamed of their Empire he continued. It provided the best assurance of their continuing freedom, and "Imperium et Libertas" was a policy "from which her Majesty's advisers do not shrink."[1]

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1. (10)? Nov 1878, M & B, vi, pp.494-5.

The speech reiterated Beaconsfield's belief that Britain must use the power afforded by her imperial stature to safeguard her interests in Europe as well as elsewhere. The source of Britain's strength lay basically in her overseas possessions but this did not mean European affairs were of no concern to her. If Britain did not make her influence felt on the continent she was liable to find herself isolated and vulnerable in the face of hostile power groupings which might threaten not only her position in Europe, but the security of her Empire as well. This was the danger Beaconsfield had seen threatening at the beginning of his ministry with the forming of the Dreikaiserbund. In his eyes, the maintenance of Britain's power and prestige depended upon her intelligent use of that same power and prestige to safeguard her own interests.

Beaconsfield had developed this realistic and highly perceptive understanding of power politics well before 1874.[1] It supplies the reason for his attempts to reassert British influence in Europe and break up the shadowy alliance between Russia, Germany and Austria in the first two years of his ministry. The necessity he saw to curb Russian activities in the Near East in order to secure the Indian Empire, had then diverted his attention to the Near East. However, the

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1. See Chapter 1.

other European powers were also involved, for one reason or another, in the Eastern crisis and it was very much a European matter. It was Britain's final success in the settlement of the Eastern Question that had made her ascendent over Russia in Europe. Now attention returned to the continent itself. Professor Medlicott regards the years 1878-80 as marking a struggle, nonetheless real for being largely concealed, between Beaconsfield and Bismarck for the leadership of Europe.[1] It is certainly true that Beaconsfield's reactions to events outside of Europe were partly determined by the effect he felt they would have upon the situation in Europe.

Yet, despite his preoccupation with events in Europe, the cornerstone of Beaconsfield's foreign policy remained the maintenance of the British Empire. It was only this Empire which afforded Britain the power to intervene successfully in Europe. However, imperial affairs appeared to be in a very satisfactory state immediately following the signing of the Berlin agreement, and it was for this reason that Beaconsfield felt he could turn his attention elsewhere. Unfortunately, the scene did not remain tranquil for long.

In the first place, it was soon apparent that the Treaty

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1. Essay by W.N.Medlicott in A.O.Sarkissian, (ed), Studies in History and Historiography, pp.242-50.

of Berlin had not brought an immediate end to the Eastern Question, for a number of problems concerning the implementation of the agreement soon appeared. The most critical from Beaconsfield's viewpoint was securing the evacuation of Russian troops from Turkish territory south of the Balkans. So long as they remained, Constantinople could not be secure. The final evacuation of Russian troops did not come until August 1879 and it was the outcome of almost constant diplomatic haggling from the time the Treaty was signed. On several occasions, it seemed not unlikely that hostilities might break out again between Russia and Turkey and the ticklish negotiations involved were a constant source of worry.

It was not the Near East, however, which was to provide Beaconsfield's main problem in the last two years of his ministry, but the remote country of Afghanistan. Beaconsfield had always viewed Russian expansion in Central Asia as part of the Russian menace to the security of the Indian Empire. He was well aware that it was through Afghanistan that northern conquerors had invaded India in the past. Consequently Afghanistan occupied an important place in Beaconsfield's plans for the defence of the Indian Empire. If Britain had gone to war with Russia over the Eastern Question, an important part of British strategy involved the invasion of Asiatic Russia by a British army marching through Afghanistan.[1] Such

1. Lytton to Salisbury, 28 Oct, 30 Nov 1876, 21 May 1877, 13 Jul 1878, Blake p.659. Also Beaconsfield to Victoria, 22 Jul 1877, M & B, vi, p.155.

a scheme was really quite ridiculous. The terrain of Afghanistan was mountainous and inhospitable; the people primitive and hostile. Even if a British expedition did cross Afghanistan into Turkestan a force of, for example, 40,000 men[1] would have been completely lost in the vast areas of hostile territory which awaited them. Nonetheless, Beaconsfield did see such an expedition as possible and must, therefore, have believed it equally plausible that Russia could threaten India by marching in the opposite direction. In view of Russian expansion into Turkestan and Bokhara in the late 1860's and early 1870's, Afghanistan thus appeared of increasing significance to Beaconsfield as a buffer against possible Russian designs on India. Britain's diplomatic relations with the Amir of Afghanistan, Sher Ali, could not be left to the old policy of "masterly inactivity", or simply leaving events beyond the north-west frontier to work themselves out.

It was with this desire for more positive action towards Afghanistan in mind that Beaconsfield selected Lytton to replace Northbrook when the latter resigned towards the end of 1875. Beaconsfield wanted "a man of ambition, imagination, some vanity and much will" to hold the Viceroyalty.[2] With

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1. The size of General Robert's column which marched on Cabul in the second Afghan War.
2. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 1 Apr 1877, M & B, vi, p.379.

Russia now on the borders of Afghanistan, he felt the situation demanded a man capable of taking positive action to defend the Indian Empire from the dangers which threatened it. Lytton's final instructions from Beaconsfield emphasised the necessity of consolidating the frontier by inducing the Amir to enter into more satisfactory relations with the British government. If this was not possible, the Amir was at least to be compelled to show clearly his attitude to Britain and Russia respectively. Something had to be done, Beaconsfield emphasised, to end the uncertainty and suspicions which had hampered Anglo-Afghan relations up until this time.[1]

As a result of his instructions, Lytton arrived in India resolved to end the policy of "masterly inactivity" and make Afghanistan a reliable buffer between the two empires. Unfortunately, Lytton proved to be a man of rather too much "ambition" and "vanity" even for Beaconsfield's taste. Determined to achieve personal greatness as Viceroy, he decided from the outset to establish his own paramount influence in Afghanistan with or without the Amir's co-operation.

So long as the possibility of an Anglo-Russian war remained even Lytton realized it was vital to maintain amicable relations with the Amir in case British troops should have to march across Afghanistan. However, once the Treaty of Berlin

1. Lady Betty Balfour, Lord Lytton's Indian Administration, pp.28-9.

had been signed, Lytton considered it was time to take steps to provide for the permanent security of the North-west frontier. Since the announcement of the Malta expedition, Russian activities in Central Asia had increased. In June 1878 a Russian mission under General Stolietov was received at Kabul by the Amir. Although the Amir was virtually forced to receive the mission by pressure from Kaufman, the Russian Governor of Turkestan, Lytton preferred to regard the Amir's actions as conclusive proof of his bad faith. He was certain that Britain must now take action to safeguard the security of the Indian frontiers and at the beginning of August, he requested permission to send a British mission to Kabul as a counter to Stolietov's mission.

Beaconsfield saw the situation in a different light. He viewed the situation in Afghanistan as a part of the Eastern Question as a whole and in this respect, the situation in August 1878 was vastly different from that at the beginning of 1876. He believed Russian imperialist ambitions had received a major check with the signing of the Berlin agreements and that Russia had withdrawn at least temporarily, from her position of aggression. On 16 September 1878 Gortchakoff sent his personal assurances to the British of the innocence of Russian intentions in Afghanistan[1] and with peace now agreed

1. Letter from Gortchakoff, 16 Sep 1878, M & B, vi, p.376.

to, Beaconsfield was confident the Russians would withdraw their mission and the whole matter would quietly lapse.[1] A direct confrontation between Russia and Britain in Afghanistan could well have jeopardized the working out of the Berlin settlement and Beaconsfield was understandably anxious to avoid such a clash. He had no intention of permitting Russia to gain a foothold in Afghanistan but believed the issue could be settled quietly with a little patience.

Unfortunately, Lytton felt he was now past the point of no return. His request for permission to send a mission to Kabul had been tentatively approved by Lord Cranbrook, Secretary of State for India, on 3 August 1878, but Lytton was clearly instructed that the route taken by the mission must be through Candahar and not via the Khyber Pass. The Viceroy, however, was determined to take the second route and made preparations to do so throughout August with considerable publicity. In the meantime, the Foreign Office had decided to send a diplomatic protest concerning the presence of the Russian mission at Kabul to St. Petersburg and it went on 19 August 1878. Cranbrook, who distinguished himself throughout the affair as both lazy and inattentive, neglected to inform Lytton of this despatch even though Beaconsfield and Salisbury

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1. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 20 Sep 1878, M & B, vi, p.376.

had decided the mission should not be sent until an answer had been received to the note.[1]

Lytton's communications with the home government were also extremely fragmentary and his telegrams home during July and August were very sketchy indeed. At this stage, it does not appear that Beaconsfield and Salisbury appreciated the precise nature of the Viceroy's plans. Full details of Lytton's instructions to the head of his mission, Sir Neville Chamberlain, did not arrive in London until 9 September 1878. Only then did Beaconsfield become aware of Lytton's intention to make Sher Ali's dismissal of General Stolietov's mission a prior condition of receiving his own. Such an action was only defensible if a major confrontation with Russia was necessary. A cable was despatched to Lytton, ordering him to delay the mission until the Foreign Office had received an answer to their despatch. Only now, did Lytton learn that such a despatch had been sent. He delayed the mission from its scheduled departing date, 16 September 1878, until 21 September 1878 but then decided he could hang back no longer. He was confident Sher Ali would accept the mission and that the home government, at heart, wanted him to send it. On 21 September 1878, he ordered Chamberlain to enter the Khyber. The mission was turned back at the frontier by Afghan soldiers,

1. For a full discussion of this and other aspects of the origins of the Second Afghan War, see M.Cowling, "Lytton, the Cabinet and the Russians, August to November, 1878", English Historical Review, lxxvi (1961), pp.60-79.

a rebuff which made war inevitable if Britain was not to lose a tremendous amount of prestige in the East.

Beaconsfield was annoyed by Lytton's headstrong actions and alarmed by their possible consequences, but it does appear that he was irked a good deal more by Lytton's failure than by what the Viceroy had tried to accomplish. "When V-Roys and Commanders-in-chief disobey orders they ought to be sure of success in their mutiny", he wrote to Cranbrook immediately after learning of Chamberlain's rebuff.[1] In the days immediately preceding the despatch of the mission, Beaconsfield had informed Cranbrook that he agreed wholeheartedly with Lytton's general policy.[2] On 22 September 1878, still before news of the setback had arrived, he wrote to Cranbrook in even stronger terms. "There are times for action", he said after commenting that this was not a time for prudence. He continued: "I am clearly of the opinion that what we want, at this present moment, is to prove our ascendancy in Afghanistan, and, to accomplish that, we must not stick at trifles..."[3] There can, therefore, be no doubt Beaconsfield entirely agreed with the aims of Lytton's policy, but Lytton had based his methods on a false premise. His approach to the problem assumed Russia to be a hostile power, and in September 1878

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1. Beaconsfield to Cranbrook, 26 Sep 1878, M & B, vi, p.382.
2. Beaconsfield to Cranbrook, 13 and 17 Sep 1878, ibid, p.381.
3. Beaconsfield to Cranbrook, 22 Sep 1878, ibid, p.382.

Beaconsfield did not agree. Russia had "sneaked out of her hostile position" he wrote to Salisbury, and if Lytton had only been prudent and obeyed orders, "Sher Ali would have been equally prudent."[1] Beaconsfield, too, believed that Afghanistan must be made a buffer against a possible Russian advance in the future. However, if Lytton had awaited the reply to the British Note, Russia would have disavowed any notion that she would support Afghanistan against the British, and Sher Ali would have given way. Britain had now been forced to resort to arms and this might bring a clash with Russia which could jeopardize the working out of the Berlin settlement and would certainly cause criticism of the government's policy at home.

Nevertheless, Beaconsfield realised "some demonstration of power and determination" was necessary, but he wished it to be as moderate as possible. Britain should occupy the Kurran Valley as a "material guarantee" without resorting to war, he proposed to the Cabinet on 4 October 1878.[2] It was an idea highly reminiscent of his proposal to occupy the Dardanelles at the beginning of the Russo-Turkish war. It was, of course, intended to achieve the objects Beaconsfield hoped his earlier proposal would have achieved and secure Britain's

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1. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 3 Oct 1878, M & B, vi, p.383.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 26 Oct 1878, ibid, p.386.

interests while antagonizing Russia as little as possible. Beaconsfield still hoped Russia might refuse to have anything to do with the crisis. His hopes were justified and Russia did, in fact, quietly withdraw from the scene.

With Russia off the scene, Beaconsfield decided to make the best of prevailing circumstances. He determined to effect the consolidation of the North-west frontier which he had long considered to be necessary for Indian security. Speaking at Guildhall in November 1878, he elaborated on this theme. The danger of an invasion of India through Asia Minor had, Beaconsfield claimed, been averted by the Cyprus Convention which gave Britain "a strong place of arms" from which to safeguard her interests, and secured the Sultan in possession of his Asiatic dominions. But the Indian Empire could not be secure so long as the "haphazard" nature of the North-west frontier made it possible for "any foe...to embarrass and disturb our dominion." However, "some peculiar circumstances have occurred in that part of the world", he continued and as a result, the government had made "arrangements by which...all anxiety respecting the north-western frontier of India will be removed."[1] Part of these "arrangements" evidently involved war, for on 21 November 1878, British troops entered the Amir's territory.

It was not Beaconsfield's intention to either annex large

1. Speech on Lord Mayor's Day, 10 November 1878, M & B, vi, pp.390-1.

areas of territory, nor to dismember Afghanistan. The "rectification" of frontiers contemplated need not in fact demand any diminution of Afghan territory at all, he told the House of Lords on 11 December 1878. All Britain needed was permission to place a minister in residence at Kabul, to be able to send Consuls to the chief towns and to make some minor territorial adjustments to the North-west frontier to render it more easily defensible.[1] In other words, this war was being fought to secure the existing frontiers and provide an insurance against the possibility of Russian expansion threatening India in the future. It was most definitely not conceived of by Beaconsfield as a war to expand British frontiers.

Beaconsfield went on to point out to the House the deeper significance he attached to events in Afghanistan. In his eyes, the influence and prestige of Britain in Europe were also at stake. "It is not a question of the Khyber Pass merely, and of some small cantonments at Dakka or Jellabad. It is a question which concerns the character and influence of England in Europe." Obviously Beaconsfield believed that for Britain to accept a serious setback in Afghanistan would be to undermine the dominant position in Europe won at the Berlin Congress. As a consequence, the balance of power in Europe, which was at

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1. 3 Hansard, 243, Cols.509-14.

this stage tilted in favour of Britain, would be adversely affected. He reminded the House that in the past the "principle of peace at any price" had disturbed and nearly destroyed "that political equilibrium so necessary to the liberties of nations" and had dimmed for the moment "even the majesty of England."[1] A successful action in Afghanistan, on the other hand, would add to British prestige and emphasise Britain's ability and determination to secure her imperial interests. The whole idea is obviously derived from Beaconsfield's belief in power as the basis of diplomacy. It was important not only for Britain to realise her own strength and use it but also for other powers to be aware of it.

Thanks largely to the brilliant operations of the column commanded by General Roberts, the progress of British forces in Afghanistan was rapid. "The check to Russia, to use a very mild expression, is complete", Beaconsfield wrote to the Queen on 6 December 1878. He hoped the Queen was well on a bright morning "which is as bright as your Majesty's imperial fortunes."[2] Sher Ali fled to Russian Turkestan and British negotiations for peace took place with his son, Yakub Khan. After some months of negotiations the Treaty of Gandamak was signed on 26 May 1879, giving Britain almost complete control over Afghan foreign policy. Beaconsfield's "scientific

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1. Cited in M & B, vi, pp.400-401.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 6 Dec 1878, ibid, pp.397-8.

frontier" appeared to have been established with relative ease. Writing to the Queen on New Year's Day 1879, Beaconsfield spoke of the "brilliant and enduring success in Asia."[1] The war had added to the achievements of the Berlin Congress. In fact, the Afghan issue was not to be settled so easily, but for the time being, the crisis there appeared to be over.

In any case, Beaconsfield's attention was now diverted to South Africa. On 22 January 1879, part of a British force invading Zululand under Lord Chelmsford was surprised by the enemy at Isandhlwana and eight hundred regulars and nearly five hundred Bantu levies were slaughtered. Reinforcements were despatched at once to South Africa but the Zulu forces under their King, Cetywayo, were not finally defeated until 4 July 1879. An evaluation of the government's policy in this crisis is not relevant to the defence of India. Suffice it to say that Beaconsfield is regarded by Blake as having rather lost his head over this new complication.[2] What are significant here are the reasons why this new setback should have so upset Beaconsfield.

Beaconsfield viewed the Zulu War as a disaster not because he felt British rule in South Africa was endangered but because he was sure such a spectacular defeat would reduce British influence in Europe and provide a drain upon British

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 1 Jan 1879, M & B, vi, p.405.
2. Blake, p.665.

military resources.[1] This would weaken British power in Europe and endanger British chances of ensuring Russia fulfilled the conditions of the Berlin Treaty. Reviewing the situation in a letter to the Queen at the end of August 1879, Beaconsfield claimed the war had done "incalculable" damage to Britain. If it had not taken place, the Queen would by this time have been "Dictatress of Europe" and the Sultan of Turkey would by now have occupied the line of the Balkans.[2] It is extremely doubtful whether events in far off South Africa exerted as decisive an influence as this. Actually the main damage done by the war was the opportunity it gave the Opposition to use the incident as yet another example of Conservative bungling. Nonetheless, Beaconsfield's reasoning is illuminating. It illustrates very clearly that, for him, there were only two vital considerations in British foreign policy: the maintenance of British power in Europe, and the using of this power to check Russia in the East and thus secure the Empire. A crisis in Afghanistan was obviously relevant to the European situation in the same way as war in South Africa. The difference lay in the importance Beaconsfield attached to Afghanistan as an essential part of Indian security. Thus a war which established British dominance in

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 11 Feb 1879, M & B, vi, p.424.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 30 Aug 1879, ibid, p.459.

Afghanistan was "a brilliant and enduring success". A war in South Africa, even although it finally added to the security of British rule there, was a disaster.

With the Zulu War over, Beaconsfield was once again complacent over the condition of Britain's external affairs. On 14 August 1879 he wrote to Lytton congratulating him on his "energy and foresight" which had been instrumental in securing "a scientific and adequate frontier for our Indian Empire." With Russia by now completely evacuated from Turkish territory, Beaconsfield felt external affairs would "figure well in the Queen's speech."[1]

Unhappily, Beaconsfield's jubilation was again premature, and his complacency was rudely shattered by news of a fresh crisis in Afghanistan. The Treaty of Gandamak had given Britain the right to install in Kabul a British resident to advise Afghanistan on matters of foreign policy and to report to the Indian government on events there. The safety of the resident, Sir Louis Cavagnari, was guaranteed by the Amir, but on 6 September 1879 Cavagnari and the whole British mission at Kabul were attacked and killed by Afghan soldiers. As far as Beaconsfield was concerned, the treachery rendered the Treaty of Gandamak completely null and void and a new settlement would have to be made. Immediate military action under

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1. Beaconsfield to Lytton, 14 Aug 1879, Balfour, p.331.

General Roberts quickly re-established British power in Afghanistan. By the middle of October 1879 the British government was in a position to consider how a lasting settlement could be achieved.

This fresh crisis did not alter Beaconsfield's conception of what British interests in Afghanistan really were. British influence in that country was, in his eyes, merely part of Indian security and to this end the best arrangement remained the maintenance of Afghanistan as an independent buffer state between the British and the Russian Empires. Beaconsfield's first inclination was to settle the problem by reinstating Yakub Khan as Amir and thus maintaining the "scientific frontier" created by the Treaty of Gandamak.[1]

However, upon further consideration, Beaconsfield, always an opportunist in this type of situation, began to consider how the new set of circumstances could be utilized to strengthen the security of India even more substantially. Writing to the Queen, he suggested that Britain should not be too hasty in withdrawing her forces from Afghanistan.

> We have had too many fits and starts in our history as far as Afghanistan and Central Asia are concerned. We must accustom the world a little to the permanence and stability of our authority there.

He suggested that Britain should occupy "the strongholds" of Afghanistan. If Britain were to take possession of Herat,

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1. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 9 Sep 1879, M & B, vi, p.479.

he believed she would be in a strategic position to prevent any attack by Russia southwards towards Merv on the North-west frontier of Afghanistan. It would also enable Britain to establish a direct link with Persia and bolster her against Russian encroachment. Beaconsfield had long felt that Persia constituted a weak link in British imperial defences in the East[1] and the country lay directly in the path of Russian expansion south. "We can, in short, if we are not in a hurry, consolidate your Majesty's Empire and inflict such a check on any rival Power, which will influence the conduct of all Eastern states!", he concluded.[2]

This was a much more forward policy towards Afghanistan than Beaconsfield had hitherto adopted, but the motive behind it remained the security of the Indian Empire. The stronger tone of British policy now was due not to a desire to add to British possessions but to strengthen Indian defences. A report from General Roberts in Kabul at the end of November also seemed to indicate a need for more positive policy developments towards Afghanistan. He claimed to have discovered evidence of a secret treaty between the Amir and Russia which had been signed after the Treaty of Berlin. Letters written by Generals Kaufman and Stolietov instigating the

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1. Beaconsfield to Salisbury, 15 Oct 1874, M & B, v, p.427.
2. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 23 Oct 1879, ibid, vi, p.482.

Afghans to attack India and to incite a general Muslim rising there, were also discovered. It seems probable that this was another example of the Tsar's lack of control over his lieutenants in distant Asian provinces and it is highly unlikely that the scheme uncovered by Roberts had official sanction. Nevertheless, one can hardly blame Beaconsfield for accepting it as concrete evidence of his worst suspicions of Russian intentions. If, at a time when Beaconsfield himself credited her with relatively peaceful intentions, Russia really had been plotting to undermine British rule in India, his policy towards Afghanistan seemed to be completely justified. The Queen need not fear a lack of strength in the Cabinet's reaction to the news, he wrote shortly afterwards.[1]

In the end, nothing came of the more forward policy Beaconsfield was considering at the end of October 1879. Negotiations were begun with Persia and Beaconsfield and Salisbury considered giving Herat to her in return for a positive alliance with India.[2] Even the arch-imperialist of them all, Queen Victoria, criticized this policy as involving an unwarranted extension of British reponsibilities, and the approaches to Persia were abandoned.

At this stage, it appeared that Britain would be forced

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 5 Dec 1879, M & B, vi, p.484.
2. Ibid.

to fall back upon Lytton's plan of dividing Afghanistan amongst the different chiefs. The Cabinet did, in fact, place Candahar in the hands of a chief who was to be independent of Kabul but under British protection. With this additional security for the North-west frontier, it was proposed to let the various petty chiefs settle the division of the remainder among themselves. At this juncture, there appeared out of Turkestan a claimant to the Afghan throne in Abdul Rahman, a nephew of Sher Ali. Beaconsfield welcomed his arrival for he was quite sure that Afghanistan as one independent state would be a much more effective buffer against Russia than a series of petty chiefdoms. Moreover, Abdul appeared to have the makings of the strong ruler Afghanistan required. Accordingly, negotiations were begun with him and they were still continuing when Beaconsfield left office in 1880.

The new Liberal ministry under the leadership of Gladstone determined to reverse Beaconsfield's forward policy in Afghanistan and considered evacuating Candahar as part of this reversal. Beaconsfield, by now a very ill man, summoned the strength to appear in the House of Lords and speak strongly against the proposal. In his last speech in the House he attempted a complete justification of his policy in the

Eastern Question, both in the Near East and Afghanistan, dealing in particular with Afghanistan. The letters uncovered by General Roberts at Kabul furnished ample evidence that his positive policy had been completely justified, he claimed. Following the signing of the Treaty of Berlin, Britain had been prepared to forget Russian movements in Central Asia when war seemed to be pending but unfortunately Russia had continued to entertain designs upon Afghanistan and India. If Britain withdrew from Afghanistan, he continued, then Russia would step in on the grounds that she could not allow anarchy upon her borders. In Beaconsfield's eyes, there was nothing reprehensible in Russia's conduct. "Russia has as good a right to create an Empire in Tartary as we have in India" he said. Nonetheless, Britain must be constantly on guard "against what must be looked upon as the inevitable designs of a very great power" in case they endangered the power of the British Empire. He then went on to discuss the strategic significance of Candahar. It was, he said, one of a number of places which were "the keys of India" and he listed the other key points in Central Asia as Herat, Ghuznee, Merv and Balk. He claimed that all of them, if not essential to Britain, would give cause for apprehension if occupied by a great military power. In the past hundred years, Britain had "appropriated many strong places in the world" and "erected

a range of fortifications" in seeking to retain the Empire. This, Beaconsfield stated, was the policy he had pursued and he hoped it would be continued. If Britain did do so then "Candahar is eminently one of those places which would contribute to the maintenance of that empire."[1] On 19 April 1881, only a few weeks after he had made his last plea for the maintenance of the Indian Empire against the Russian threat, Beaconsfield died. It was a fitting swansong.

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Posterity has judged the Second Afghan War as unnecessary but the blame for the hostilities can hardly be laid upon Beaconsfield's shoulders. He, too, felt that the aims of his policy in Afghanistan could, and should, have been achieved peacefully. His responsibility for the outbreak of war is really limited to his appointing, as Viceroy, Lytton whose reckless and headstrong policy actually precipitated the war. With this in mind, Beaconsfield's policy towards Afghanistan appears somewhat more reasonable than his policy in the Near East in 1876-8. Certainly the connection between Afghanistan and Indian security is a good deal less tenuous than the link

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1. Speech in the House of Lords, 4 Mar 1881, Kebbel, ii, pp.262-71.

Beaconsfield had tried to establish between the independence of Constantinople and the safety of the Indian Empire. An invasion of India through Afghanistan was hardly feasible, but if Russia had been able to bring Afghanistan under its control, it would have been possible for them to place pressure upon the North-west frontier. This would have enabled them to divert British attention from events elsewhere almost at will and would have been a constant source of friction between the two powers. There is no evidence of the Russian Foreign Office ever considering such a plan but the activities of Kaufmann and Stolietoff in Russian Turkestan, especially after General Roberts' discovery, did provide some justification for Beaconsfield's fears. His outlook was shared by a good number of high ranking offials in the Indian government. In short, his policy, while probably based upon a false understanding of Russian intentions, was at least reasonable.

His policy, moreover, was consistent with the course of action he had advocated during the Eastern Crisis. In Beaconsfield's eyes, the threat from Russia through Afghanistan was a part of the same threat posed to Indian security by Russian expansion in Asia Minor and through European Turkey to Bulgaria. He had endeavoured to meet the threat in the same way, by a positive defence of the status quo in order to contain Russian expansion. In Afghanistan, as in the Near East, as in Europe

the basis of Beaconsfield's policy was the maintenance of the Empire and the preservation of British power.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSION.

Since the publication of Monypenny and Buckle's volumes, historians have tended to dismiss Beaconsfield's diplomacy as, in Medlicott's words, "no more than a spasmodic exercise of ignorance and bellicosity."[1] Whatever criticisms may be levied at Beaconsfield's foreign policy, he deserves more serious treatment than that. In particular, the policies which he pursued during the Near Eastern crisis of 1876-1878 and in Afghanistan in 1878-1879, appear to have been consistent. Moreover, they were successful in achieving the aims Beaconsfield set for them. In both cases he was endeavouring to maintain and improve the security of the Indian Empire in the face of Russian expansion.

International politics were to Beaconsfield power politics and he believed the power of Britain to depend largely upon her vast imperial possessions. The British Empire guaranteed Britain, so he reasoned, a vast potential of material resources and strategic bases all over the world. Even more important in Beaconsfield's eyes, however, was the tremendous amount of prestige the Empire afforded Britain. He perceived something most of his contemporaries did not by realising that prestige was not just a matter of sentiment but a crucial factor in

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1. W.N.Medlicott, Studies in Diplomatic History and Historiography, p.225.

determining the amount of power and influence a nation could wield in international politics. Thus, Britain's overseas empire was absolutely vital to her continuing power and prosperity. Of the Empire, Beaconsfield believed one possession to be of special value. In his eyes, India was the cornerstone of the Empire and of far greater significance than Britain's other colonial possessions. Whatever happened, nothing must be allowed to jeopardize British rule there.

When Beaconsfield assumed office in 1874, he was convinced that the policy of the preceding government had left Britain with her prestige, and therefore her power, greatly diminished. Gladstone's policy of remaining aloof from European affairs had lowered British influence in Europe and left Britain isolated in face of an ominous grouping of the three Imperial powers, Russia, Germany and Austria. As a result, Britain appeared weak and vulnerable to the other European powers at a time when a growing threat to her Empire from Asia, particularly required her to be strong.

This threat to the Indian Empire from Asia seemed obvious to Beaconsfield. By the early 1870's, the vast programme of imperial expansion undertaken by Russia following the Crimean settlement, had brought her to the borders of Afghanistan and Persia, leaving only these two countries now separating Russia from India. Moreover, Russia's repudiation

of the Black Sea Clauses of the Treaty of Paris of 1856, had made it possible for her to maintain a navy on the Black Sea and threaten the security of Constantinople. Beaconsfield considered it inevitable that this great southward sweep by Russia would ultimately lead to a clash between the Russian and British Empires. After the repudiation of the Black Sea Clauses in 1871, he was certain that Russia aimed at the seizure of Constantinople which would give her an outlet into the Mediterranean and also an entrance to Asia Minor. This, Beaconsfield believed, would allow Russia to threaten British communications with India through the Suez Canal. If Russia continued her advance in Central Asia, she would also soon be in a position to place direct pressure upon the frontiers of India. In Beaconsfield's opinion, such a situation would leave the Indian Empire dangerously insecure.

In 1874, Beaconsfield was determined to take positive action to ensure "the coming crisis" would not adversely affect Britain or her Empire. If Britain was to remain a great imperial power, then she must act to secure her interests and show her strength to the world. Nonetheless, this must not be allowed to obscure the fact that Beaconsfield from the outset, conceived his policy to be one of defence and it was to be based upon the preservation of the status quo in the East. It was a policy designed to uphold and maintain the

British Empire already in existence rather than to enlarge the Empire further.

The first two years of Beaconsfield's ministry saw him seizing every possible opportunity to reassert British influence and advertise her imperial character. Britain's unsolicited participation in the War Scare of May 1875, when she added her own offices to the Russian efforts to mediate between Germany and France, emphasised his conviction that Britain was a European power and should act in that capacity. A clear warning of the esteem in which Britain held her Indian Empire and her determination to defend it at all costs, was issued with the purchase of the Suez Canal shares and the announcement of the Royal Titles Bill. In both cases, Beaconsfield, speaking in the House, emphasised that his government had intended its actions to convey precisely this warning.

Then, with the revolt in Herzegovina in 1875 and the complications consequent upon Turkey's failure to squash it, the Eastern Question was re-opened. It immediately claimed Beaconsfield's full attention. The position of Turkey in Europe was, of course, a European question and Beaconsfield was always careful to emphasise that he considered Turkey's presence in Europe essential to the maintenance of the balance of power and the preservation of European peace. There were strong Palmerstonian overtones to this view. Beaconsfield's

main worry, however, was the use Russia might make of this fresh crisis to press southwards through Europe to Constantinople and through Asia Minor towards the Suez thus, in his opinion, endangering Indian security. He felt all his earlier suspicions of Russian intentions in this direction to have been confirmed by Russia's demands for direct action by the great powers to settle the situation and was convinced that Constantinople, the "key to India", was now Russia's objective. For the next two years, his policy was designed to prevent the Russians ever gaining control of the city and to ensure that Turkey remained an effective buffer between Russia and the Suez Canal in Asia Minor. With the signing of the Cyprus Convention and the success of Britain at the Berlin Congress, Beaconsfield felt his aims had been achieved. "The threatened injury to the British Empire has been averted", he told the House of Lords upon his return from Berlin.[1]

The Congress was barely over when Beaconsfield found himself faced with a new crisis in Afghanistan. It was not welcome, for Beaconsfield was sure it had been needlessly precipitated by Lytton's headstrong actions. Nonetheless, he determined almost immediately to make use of the situation to strengthen the North-west frontier of India. "The intrigues of Russia determined yr. Majesty's Govt. to secure the gates

1. 18 July 1878, Kebbel, ii, p.180.

of India. They have accomplished their purpose", he wrote to the Queen after the successful completion of the first campaign of the Second Afghan War.[1] In Afghanistan, as in the Near East, Beaconsfield's concern was with the security of India against the Russians. Admittedly he never attached quite the same significance to the Afghan crisis as he did to the situation in the Near East. He was confident that Russia had been, for the moment, checked by the Berlin Treaty which had not only halted Russian encroachments into the Ottoman Empire but had also signified the final breakup of the Dreikaiserbund and a vast increase in British influence in Europe. In the light of this, he quite correctly considered it unlikely that the Russians would risk anything which would lead to a confrontation with Britain. Beaconsfield's attention had swung towards Europe by this stage, and he was concerned above all to maintain the gains, influence and prestige which Britain had made in Europe at the Congress.

Despite this, Beaconsfield did view his policy in Afghanistan as consistent with the policy which he had pursued in the Near East. In his speech at Guildhall in 1878, he clearly linked the defence of the North-west frontier with the defence of India from an attack through Asia Minor, pointing out that

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1. Beaconsfield to Victoria, 6 Dec 1878, M & B, vi, p.397.

it was no use guarding against the latter eventuality and not the former. Beaconsfield always envisaged the creation of a line of defences against Russian advances stretching from Constantinople to the borders of Tibet. He spoke on a number of occasions of Britain's "range of fortifications" which protected the Indian Empire.[1] It was as a part of this scheme that he considered concluding an alliance with Persia towards the end of 1879 for he was always aware that Persia was a weak link in this chain of defence. His policies in both the Near East and in Afghanistan must be viewed primarily as attempts to consolidate this barrier of neutral territory against Russian encroachment.

If it would be incorrect to criticise Beaconsfield's Eastern policy on the grounds that it was inconsistent, it remains true that by and large his policy in the East was unrealistic and misdirected. Beaconsfield, it is true, was largely successful in realising the aims of his diplomacy in the East. He did check the Russians in their advance towards Constantinople and into Asia Minor and he did establish British paramountcy in Afghanistan although at the cost of British lives. Moreover, the actions of Britain in the Eastern Question were instrumental in raising British prestige and

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1. For instance, Speech on Suez purchase, 8 Feb 1875, 3 Hansard 227 Col.100; Speech against the evacuation of Candahar, 4 Mar 1881, M & B, vi, pp.604-5.

influence in Europe to new heights and in this context Beaconsfield's policy did benefit Britain substantially. Neither can one criticise too harshly his handling of British diplomacy. Throughout, he displayed a great aptitude for seizing opportunities as they came, and a readiness to adjust to changing circumstances. Considering the fact that his very forthright policy of threatening Russia with war in the early months of 1878 was based mainly upon bluff, he displayed both great courage and ability in judging just how much pressure he could exert without having his bluff called. Yet, when all this has been said, it still remains true that Beaconsfield's policy in the East was founded upon a misconception of the whole situation there.

The basic premise of his policy in the East assumed Russian expansion to pose a serious threat to Indian security, but no evidence has ever been discovered to indicate that Russia ever did have any intention of menacing British rule in India. This was the great flaw. Superficially, his policy in Afghanistan at least, appears quite reasonable. If Russia controlled Afghanistan she would indeed be in contact with India along her North-west frontier. But if Russia had taken over Afghanistan, her own frontiers would have been much more dangerously over-extended and vulnerable than those of India. It was wildly improbable that she would ever be able to mount

a serious attack upon India from this quarter. Beaconsfield's policy in the Near East appears even less sensible. His contention that Constantinople was the "key to India" at the very least indicates a lamentable lack of geographical knowledge, very probably a result of drawing sweeping conclusions from small scale maps. The same is true of his concept of a "range of fortifications". Actually, the distances and terrain involved made the establishment of such a system of defence quite out of the question and it was really quite untrue to suggest that Britain had achieved it.

It is essential to view Beaconsfield's mistakes within the context of the times of his ministry and to acknowledge that his lot was hardly an easy one. His misunderstandings of the situation were shared by many others, often by men such as Sir Henry Elliot and Lord Lytton whose knowledge of local circumstances placed them in a better position than Beaconsfield to make an accurate judgment. Moreover, much of his lack of knowledge can be attributed to the inadequate and inaccurate information he received from his subordinates. This was particularly so in the Near East, where it even appears possible that Elliot may have deliberately withheld information.[1] It must also be remembered that Beaconsfield was seventy-two years old in 1874 and his health, poor then, deteriorated

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1. Seton-Watson, pp.65-7.

through his ministry. He was almost constantly ill during the critical year of 1877 and yet was forced to carry the responsibility for foreign policy virtually on his own. However courageous and industrious Beaconsfield may have been, he simply did not possess at this stage in his remarkable career, the energy and capacity for sheer hard work necessary to come to grips with the complex situation with which he was faced.

Yet, when all these extenuating circumstances have been taken into account, the misjudgements involved in Beaconsfield's Eastern policy remain at least partly the fault of Beaconsfield himself. However hardened and cynical his thirty-seven years of political life before 1874 had made him, Beaconsfield remained a romantic at heart. He was convinced that the Indian Empire, which he revered as the greatest of Britain's imperial possessions, was endangered. He was equally certain that he was the man to save it. As a consequence, he tended both to dramatise his own role and achievements and to grossly over-simplify the situation with which he was faced. His suspicions of Russian intentions towards India blinded him to the true situation in the Balkans and to the obstacles in the way of any Russian threat towards India. Beaconsfield's policy in the East was neither inconsistent nor unsuccessful, but it was largely unnecessary.

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The conclusion to be drawn from this survey is that Beaconsfield's policy in the East, 1874-1880, shows no basic inconsistency. However, it was based upon an inadequate understanding of the situation, both in the Near East and in Central Asia. Ironically, this did not prevent Beaconsfield from achieving anything of value. Britain's role in settling the Eastern Question brought a tremendous increase in British prestige and influence in Europe. The war in Afghanistan, if nothing else, emphasised the imperial pre-occupations of Britain. Whatever other mistakes Beaconsfield may have made, he was correct in believing that the most important thing for a great imperial power was to act as such.

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